

The Story of SAIUNIKOKU

4

Art by
Kairi Yura
Story by
Sai Yukino



Chapter 13



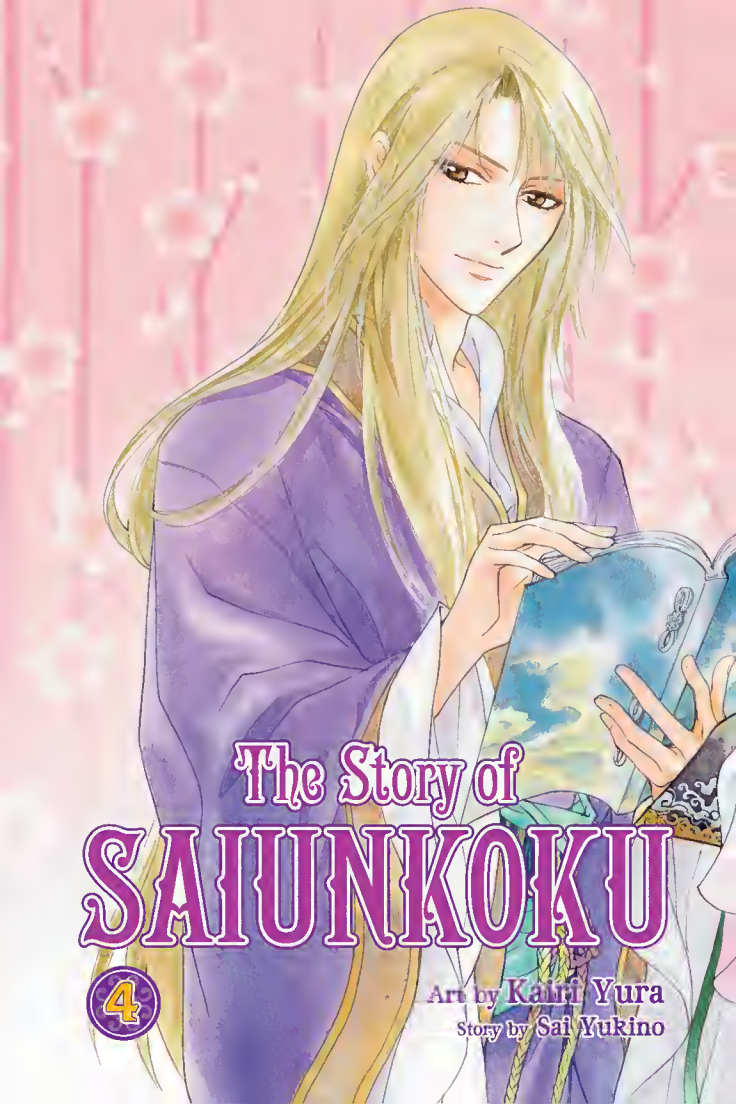


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Volume 4

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Story Thus Far

The impoverished young Lady Shurei of the Hong clan has begun working as a temporary assistant in the short-staffed Ministry of the Treasury, along with her freeloading houseguest Ensei. However, as women are not permitted in the Outer Court of the Imperial Palace, Shurei disguises herself as a boy as she works under the sharp eyes of the infamously strict Minister of the Treasury, Kijin Ko. This summer job is challenging to say the least! However, as Shurei has always dreamed of becoming Saiunkoku's first female civil servant, she perseveres valiantly through the hardships. Meanwhile, Ryuki, the young emperor of Saiunkoku, has made a shocking announcement: "We propose women be allowed to take the Imperial Civil Exam!" It seems Shurei's dreams are coming one step closer to reality, but...?!



Ryuki Shi

The young emperor of Saiunkoku. He is widely known as an "idiot ruler," but it seems he has his reasons for appearing so.



Koyu Ri

A civil servant renowned throughout the court as a genius, currently stuck in a frivolous position (perhaps?) serving Ryuki. He has a hopelessly bad sense of direction.



Shurei Hong

A young noblewoman of the prestigious but impoverished Hong clan. She recently entered the Inner Court as Ryuki's tutor and erstwhile Noble Consort.



Shuei Ran

A military officer. He is a general of the Yulin Guard, a squad of soldiers charged with protecting the emperor. He is inseparable from Koyu (much to his friend's tre).



Seiran Shi

After being taken in by Shurei's father, Shoka, Seiran has served the Hong household as its faithful retainer ever since. He is Shurei's protector.



Ensei Ro

A freeloader who is currently staying at Shoka's house and working temporarily under Kijin Ko along with Shurei. He is an old acquaintance of Seiran's.



WHAT
AN ODD
KEY
THIS IS.

ONE
WOULD
NEVER
KNOW
THIS IS
SUPPOSED
TO BE A
KEY.

NO MATTER
HOW MANY
TIMES I SEE IT,
I CAN'T MAKE
SENSE OF IT...

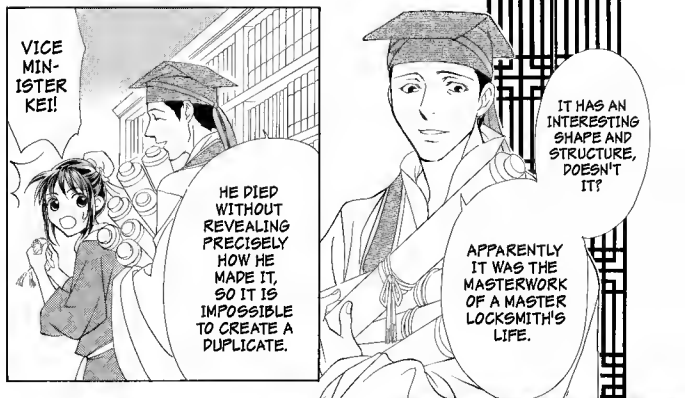


ka-chak



klak







EVEN
AFTER
SEEING
IT ON A
DAILY
BASIS...



YES! I AM
EXCITED.
VERY MUCH
SO!

BUT...

WHAT'S
THE
MATTER?
YOU USED
TO GET SO
EXCITED
GOING
THERE.

...IT'S
STILL SO
OVERWHELM-
ING...

EVEN AFTER
GOING IN
FOR MORE
THAN TEN DAYS
STRAIGHT,
I STILL CAN'T
SEEM TO TAKE
IT ALL IN.



IT'S FAR-
REMOVED
FROM THE
LITTLE RICE-
AND-BARLEY
WORLD THAT
I LIVE IN.



THE
IMPERIAL
TREASURE
ROOM
REALLY IS A
FRIGHTENING
PLACE!



IT
EXHAUSTS
ME
SOMEHOW...



RELAX
AND GET
RESTED
FOR THE
WEEK
AHEAD.

TOMORROW
IS YOUR
DAY OFF,
ISN'T IT?





WEREN'T
YOU
THE ONE
WHO SAID
WORKING
YOURSELF TO
EXHAUSTION
WOULDN'T DO
ANYONE ANY
GOOD?

YES,
BUT...

ARE YOU
SURE,
SIR?
WE'RE SO
SHORT-
HANDED...



Take care
of this
straight
away.

Ah!

RESTING
PROPERLY
WHEN GIVEN
THE CHANCE
IS ALSO A
PART OF
YOUR JOB.

YES
SIR!



SHU REALLY
HAS WORKED
SOME MAGIC
ON THE
MINISTER.

HA

WHAT?

NOTH-
ING.

He's in
a good
mood
today.



IN THAT
CASE,
I'LL SEE
YOU LATER
ON, VICE
MINISTER
KEI!

My
work is
piling up!



...WE
HAVE BEEN
SENSING
SHUREI'S
PRESENCE
SO OFTEN.



YES,
LATELY...

*Why do I have
to do this too?*



SHUREI
MUST BE
CALLING
TO US!

PERHAPS
IT IS A
PREMO-
NITION.

OH



SURELY SHE
WOULDN'T BE
ANGRY IF
WE WENT TO
VISIT HER
AFTER ALL
THIS TIME.

AFTER ALL,
IT'S BEEN
A FULL
THREE
MONTHS
SINCE LAST
WE MET.

IF THAT'S
THE CASE...
NO,
IT SURELY
MUST BE
THE CASE!



HALF OUR
MEDDLESOME
IMPERIAL
GUARDS ARE
ABSENT FROM
THE PALACE
RIGHT NOW
TO AID IN THE
BANDIT HUNT.

IT SHOULD
BE A SIMPLE
MATTER TO
SLIP OUT
UNNOTICED
FROM THE
PALACE.

AS
WE HAVE
MATTERS OF
GOVERNANCE
TO HANDLE
DURING THE
DAY, IF WE ARE
TO GO, IT WILL
HAVE TO BE
AFTER
NIGHTFALL..

WE
SHALL
GO TO
VISIT
SHUREI!

Welcome,
Ryuki.
♡

AND SHUEI
OFTEN TOLD
US TO HAVE A
CHANGE OF
PACE EVERY
NOW AND
THEN!

WE HAVE
NOT BEEN AT
ALL REMISS IN
SENDING HER
GIFTS AND
LETTERS...

AH, OF
COURSE...

WE HAD
BETTER
DISPATCH A
NOTE TO SHOKA
INFORMING
HIM OF OUR
INTENT.

His
Majesty has
not fully
grasped the
actual
meaning
of
"midnight
tryst."

MEETING
IN SECRET
MUST BE WHAT
IS COMMONLY
REFERRED
TO AS A
"MIDNIGHT
TRYST."



BIG
BROTHER—
I MEAN,
CAP'N!
LOOK—
THE GATES OF
THE CITY!

HMPH!
LOOKS
LIKE KIYO
ISN'T
SUCH
A BIG
DEAL.

I CAN
SEE
KIYO
FROM
HERE!



YES,
CAP'N!

IF WE GO IN
LOOKING LIKE A
COUPLE OF OUT-
OF-TOWNERS,
WE'LL GET
LAUGHED AT BY
THE LOCALS.
GOT IT?

NOW LISTEN,
YOSHUN.
ONCE WE GET
INSIDE THE CITY,
YOU CAN'T STARE
AND GAWK
LIKE SOME
COUNTRY BOY.



WOW!
YOU'RE
GREAT,
CAP'N!

AFTER ALL,
WE'RE THE
FEARSOME
BANDITS
KNOWN AS
"THE VULTURES
OF SA
PROVINCE!"

WE HAVE TO
PROTECT OUR
REPUTATION! ONCE
WE ACCOMPLISH
THE SECRET MISSION
WE CAME ALL
THE WAY FROM SA
PROVINCE TO DO,
WE'LL PROVE HOW
TOUGH WE ARE!

YEAH!
WE SHOULD
GO
SIGHTSEE
AT THE
PALACE
TOO!

YAY!
I CAN'T
WAIT FOR
TOMORROW!

AND BUY
SOU-
VENIRS!
MAYBE A
SPECIAL
FOOD
YOU CAN
GET ONLY
IN SHI
PRO-
VINCE!

LET'S
EAT
LOTS OF
YUMMY
FOOD!

BUT SINCE WE HAD
TO COME ALL THE WAY
OUT HERE TO THE
CAPITAL ANYWAY,
WE MAY AS WELL
TAKE THE CHANCE TO
HAVE FUN WITH SOME
PRETTY LADIES...



ARE YOU
COMING
DOWN WITH
A COLD,
ENSEI?

NAH.
DON'T
THINK
SO.

MAN WITH
A CROSS-
SHAPED SCAR
ON HIS LEFT
CHEEK—
JUST YOU
WAIT. WE'RE
COMING
FOR YOU!

WILL
YOU BE
ABLE
TO COME
WITH ME
TOMOR-
ROW...

...ESPECIALLY
AS MINISTER
KO GAVE YOU
"HOMEWORK"
ON YOUR
DAY OFF?

U^{kaw}
kaw



YOU
SHOULDN'T
PUSH YOURSELF
TOO HARD, ENSEI.
YOU'RE NOT
EXACTLY A
SPRING CHICKEN
ANYMORE.



DON'T
YOU WORRY,
PRINCESS.
ONCE I EAT
SOME OF YOUR
HOME COOKING,
THERE'S NOTH-
ING I CAN'T
HANDLE!

AH, THAT
MOUNTAIN-
SIZED PILE
OF BUDGET
REQUESTS
FOR ME
TO WORK
THROUGH...



NOTHING.

WHAT'S
SO
FUNNY,
SEIRAN?



JUST
HOW OLD
DOES THE
PRINCESS
THINK I
AM...?



Eh?



I'll
kill you.

I'll tell them
about your
true evil
nature!!

WELCOME
HOME,
FATHER.

DINNER
SHOULD
BE READY
SOON.



OH!
LOOKS
LIKE
YOU'RE
HAVING
FUN IN
HERE.



PRIN-
CESS?



ENSEI,
MAY I
COME
IN?



krii



YOU
DIDN'T
SLEEP
ALL
NIGHT?

IS IT
MORNING
ALREADY
...?



I'LL BE
GOOD AS
NEW ONCE
I HAVE
SOME
BREAKFAST,
SO DON'T
YOU
WORRY.

NOT
SLEEPING
FOR ONE
NIGHT
WON'T
HARM
ME.



NO, I'M FINE.
I CAN GO.
IF I WERE TO
LET YOU GO
OUT WITHOUT
AN ESCORT,
SEIRAN
REALLY WOULD
KILL ME.

I
GUESS
YOU
REALLY
WON'T BE
ABLE TO
COME
TODAY,
HUH?



REALLY?
THEN
LET'S EAT
QUICKLY
AND GET
GOING!

ACTUALLY,
IT'S CLOSER
TO LUNCHTIME
THAN
BREAKFAST.



TOMORROW
IS THE
ANNIVERSARY
OF MY MOTHER'S
DEATH. THAT'S
WHY I WANTED
TO GO THERE
AND TIDY UP A
BIT TODAY.



BUT
ISN'T THE
SEASON
FOR
VISITING
GRAVES
ALMOST
OVER?

SO WE'RE
CLEANING
YOUR MOM'S
HEADSTONE
TODAY,
HUH?



PRINCESS,
WHAT DO YOU
THINK ABOUT
DIGGING UP
ONE OF THESE
SAPLINGS AND
BRINGING IT
BACK HOME
WITH US?

HUH?



IT'S BEEN
SO HOT
THIS YEAR,
SO NOT MANY
FLOWERS
ARE
BLOOMING.



THE
GARDEN...



I WAS JUST
THINKING
HOW THE
GARDEN
LOOKED A
LITTLE SAD
AND
BARREN.

WHY DON'T
WE TAKE A
TREE THAT'LL
BLOOM WITH
SOME PRETTY
FLOWERS
OR SOME-
THING?



ALL
RIGHT.

THANK YOU...
BUT IT'S FINE.
IT'LL BE TOO
HEAVY AND
CUMBERSOME
CARRYING IT
ALL THE WAY
HOME.



AH I'M
PRETTY CLOSE
TO WRAPPING IT
UP NOW, I THINK.
SO I'LL HAVE TO
IMPOSE ON YOUR
HOSPITALITY FOR
ONLY A LITTLE
WHILE LONGER.

THAT
REMINDS ME,
ENSEI,
HOW IS THAT
ERRAND OF
YOURS GOING?
THE ONE
YOU CAME TO
KIYO FOR?



OH-HO!
WHAT
A NICE
THING TO
HEAR.



I'LL BE
SORRY
TO SEE
YOU GO...



ONLY
SEVEN
MORE
DAYS...

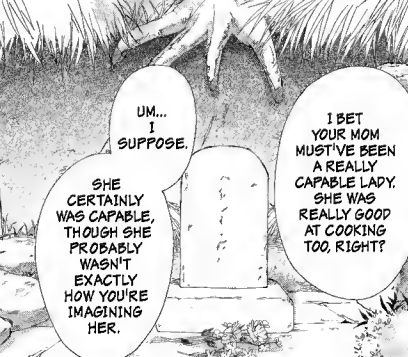
I
SEE...

MAYBE
ANOTHER
SEVEN
DAYS
OR SO?

HMM...
PROBABLY
UNTIL SOME OF
THE REGULAR
STAFF IN THE
MINISTRY OF
THE TREASURY
START COMING
BACK, I
GUESS.

HOW
MUCH
LONGER DO
YOU THINK
YOU'LL
BE ABLE
TO STAY?





UM...
I
SUPPOSE.

SHE
CERTAINLY
WAS CAPABLE,
THOUGH SHE
PROBABLY
WASN'T
EXACTLY
HOW YOU'RE
IMAGINING
HER.

I BET
YOUR MOM
MUST'VE BEEN
A REALLY
CAPABLE LADY.
SHE WAS
REALLY GOOD
AT COOKING
TOO, RIGHT?



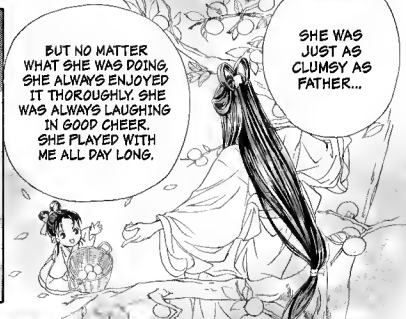
IT
WAS
AGES
AGO.

poft
poft



I WAS
SICKLY AS
A CHILD,
AND SHE
WOULD SIT
UP CARING
FOR ME.

HUH?



BUT NO MATTER
WHAT SHE WAS DOING,
SHE ALWAYS ENJOYED
IT THOROUGHLY. SHE
WAS ALWAYS LAUGHING
IN GOOD CHEER.
SHE PLAYED WITH
ME ALL DAY LONG.

SHE WAS
JUST AS
CLUMSY AS
FATHER...



I'M NOT.
IT WAS ONLY
AFTER MY
MOTHER DIED
THAT I
MYSTERIOUSLY
STARTED
GROWING
STRONGER.

YOU'RE
KIDDING.

YOUR MOM
MUST'VE
BEEN
WATCHING
OVER YOU.



MY
BODY
USED TO BE
WEAK
WHEN
I WAS
YOUNG.

YOU?

SICKLY?

What's
that look
for?



I SEE,
SO THAT'S
WHY
YOU HATE
THUNDER
AND
LIGHTNING.



THERE
WAS A
THUNDER-
STORM
THAT
DAY...



MOTHER
WAS
ALWAYS
SO STRONG
AND
HEALTHY.

YET IT
HAPPENED
SO FAST.
SHE HAD
JUST BEEN
SMILING AND
LAUGHING
THE DAY
BEFORE.

MOTHER...

THE
FOLLOWING
DAY SHE
NO LONGER
MOVED
AT ALL.

MOTHER...!

I
SEE.

I HAD
BEEN SICK
AT THE TIME
AS WELL,
BUT I
RECOVERED
SHORTLY
AFTER.

IN THE
MIDST OF
THAT RAGING
THUNDER-
STORM,
SHE SLIPPED
AWAY FROM
US, LOOKING
AS THOUGH
SHE WERE
ONLY
SLEEPING.

I...

...I TOOK
MOTHER'S
LIFE FROM
HER...!

YOUR
MOTHER
MUST HAVE
PROTECTED
YOU.

PLIP



I COULD
NEVER
SAY IT TO
FATHER OR
SEIRAN...

HOW
COULD I
MAKE THEM
COMFORT
ME WHEN
THEY WERE
GRIEVING
AS MUCH AS
I WAS?

EVEN
THOUGH
THEY LOVED
MOTHER
AS MUCH AS
I DID.

I'M SURE
THEY'D JUST
COMFORT ME
AND SAY,
"DON'T BE SILLY.
IT'S NOT YOUR
FAULT."

MOTHER
DIED...
IN MY
PLACE...



DON'T
BE
RIDICU-
LOUS!



I
HATE
SUM-
MER...

...AND
THUNDER...
THEY'VE
TAKEN
EVERYTHING
I HOLD
PRECIOUS
AWAY...



EVEN IF
THAT WERE
POSSIBLE,
DON'T YOU
THINK YOUR
MOM WOULD
BE
HAPPY?

I
WANTED
SOMEONE
TO
TELL ME
I WAS
WRONG...

I'VE
WANTED
TO SAY
THESE
WORDS
FOR SO
LONG.

...THAT I
WASN'T
THE CAUSE
OF LOSING
THOSE
HAPPY
DAYS...

AND I'VE
WANTED
SO BADLY
TO HEAR A
RESPONSE.



BUT IF YOU
KEEP CRYING
YEAR AFTER YEAR
WHENEVER
SUMMER COMES,
YOU'LL PROBABLY
MAKE YOUR MOM
CRY IN HEAVEN
TOO.

SEIRAN
AND YOUR
DAD
HAVE BEEN
WORRYING
ABOUT YOU,
YOU KNOW?

I GUESS
THIS IS WHY
YOU'VE BEEN
LOOKING
MORE AND MORE
DOWN EACH
DAY.



I'VE
FORGOTTEN...

PROBABLY
BECAUSE I
HAD MORE GOOD
MEMORIES OF
IT THAN BAD
HOW ABOUT YOU,
PRINCESS?

IT WAS
SUMMER WHEN
I LOST MY
FAMILY, BUT I
LOVE THIS
SEASON.



OF
COURSE
IT IS.

So

I
GUESS
IT IS...

ISN'T IT
KIND OF
A SHAME
TO REJECT
AN ENTIRE
SEASON
FROM
YOUR
LIFE?

BUT YOU
CAN RECALL
THEM BACK
TO YOU, CAN'T
YOU? IF YOU
DID, I'M SURE
YOU'D LIKE
THE SUMMER
AGAIN.



YOU'RE
SIXTEEN NOW,
PRINCESS.
YOU'LL SOON
BECOME A
FULL-FLEDGED
ADULT.



I'M
OFFICIALLY
TELLING YOU
RIGHT NOW
THAT YOU HAVE
NOTHING TO
BLAME YOURSELF
FOR. SO YOU
CAN LET IT GO
NOW, CAN'T
YOU?

MAKING
THE FOLKS
AROUND YOU
WORRY IS
SOMETHING
ONLY A KID
DOES.

SO THIS
WILL BE
THE LAST
OF YOUR
SAD
SUMMERS,
OKAY?



THAT'S
ALL PART
OF BEING
A GOOD
MAN!

YOU'RE
TRULY
KIND AND
UNSPARING
AT THE
SAME TIME,
AREN'T
YOU?



IF YOU CAN'T
APPRECIATE
THE RUGGED
CHARM OF MY
MANLY BEARD,
YOU'RE
DEFINITELY
STILL A KID!

SAY THAT
AFTER YOU'VE
SHAVED
OFF THIS
SCRAGGLY
BEARD!



BY MY
MOTHER'S
ANNIVERSARY
TOMORROW...
I PROMISE
I'LL CHEER
UP.

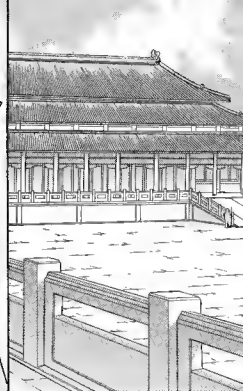
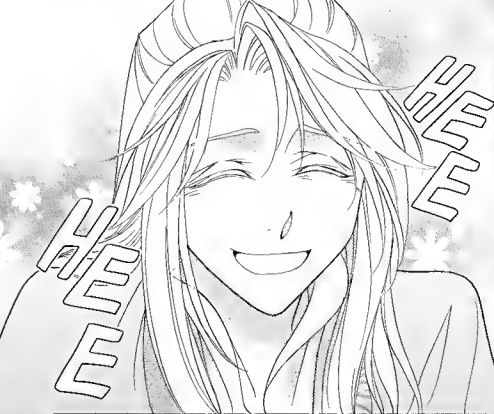


BY
TOMOR-
ROW...

HUH?



LOOKS LIKE
YOU'VE TAKEN
ANOTHER
STEP TOWARD
BECOMING A
GREAT WOMAN,
PRINCESS.



IT'S
MAKING
MY SKIN
CRAWL.

HE'S
STRANGELY
HAPPY
TODAY...



KOYU!

NOT A
CHANCE!
IF HE HAD,
HE WOULD'VE
COME
STRAIGHT
AT US IN
A RAGE...

...DEMANDING
WHY WE
DIDN'T TELL
HIM SHE
WAS HERE.



PERHAPS
HE FOUND
OUT ABOUT
SHUREI?



WE'VE
FINISHED
REVIEWING
ALL THE
DOCUMENTS
IN THIS
PILE!

WHICH
ONES
ARE
NEXT?!



WHAT
DO YOU
TAKE
US FOR,
ANYWAY?

YOUR
MAJESTY...
YOU DIDN'T
DIG UP
SOMETHING
STRANGE
AND EAT IT,
DID YOU?



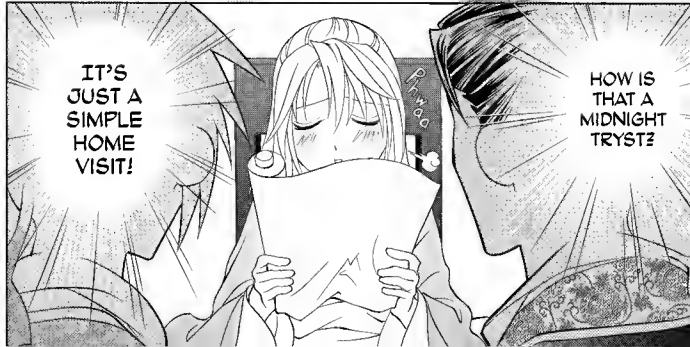
OH?
...AH.

IT MUST
BE BECAUSE
WE HAVE
DETERMINED
THAT TONIGHT
WE SHALL
SET OUT FOR
A MIDNIGHT
TRYST!



KOYU IS
JUST ADMIRING
HOW FULL OF
ENTHUSIASM YOU
SEEM TO BE
TODAY, YOUR
HIGHNESS.

Heh heh





AND DID YOU NOT SAY IT WAS IMPORTANT TO TAKE A REST ONCE IN A WHILE?

BUT WE WILL RETURN IN TIME FOR THE MORNING SESSION OF COURT TOMORROW!



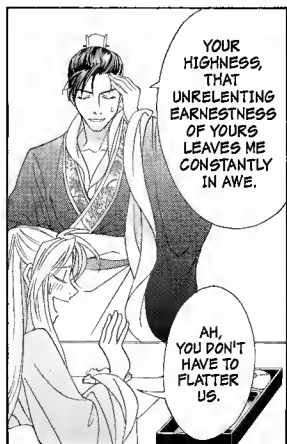
SHOULDN'T YOU CONSIDER THAT OPENLY TELLING ME YOUR PLANS WILL LIKELY RESULT IN MY THWARTING THEM?

YOUR HIGHNESS, I FEEL IT IS MY DUTY TO REMIND YOU THAT I AM A GENERAL IN THE PALACE GUARD.



WHAT DO YOU THINK, KOYU?

AS IT IS ONLY MASTER SHOKAI'S HOME YOU'RE GOING TO, AND IT WILL BE A SIMPLE, ONE-NIGHT STAY, I SUPPOSE IT'S ALL RIGHT THIS ONCE.



YOUR HIGHNESS, THAT UNRELENTING EARNESTNESS OF YOURS LEAVES ME CONSTANTLY IN AWE.

AH, YOU DON'T HAVE TO FLATTER US.

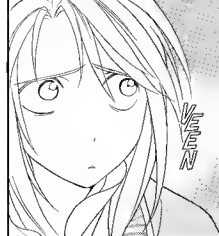


YES!

THERE IS
NOTHING
WE CANNOT
DO RIGHT
NOW!



IF YOU
INTEND TO
GO OUT, WILL
YOU KINDLY
HURRY AND
FINISH THAT
PILE OF
WORK BEFORE
YOU LEAVE,
PLEASE?



VEEN

EVEN IF
I SAY NO,
YOU'D STILL
FIND A WAY
TO GO, I
SUPPOSE.



YES!
JUST
LEAVE
IT ALL
TO US!

AND WHILE
YOU'RE DOING
THAT, ALSO
STRAIGHTEN UP
THE MESS AROUND
YOUR DESK AND
PUT EVERYTHING
IN ITS PROPER
PLACE.

OKAY!

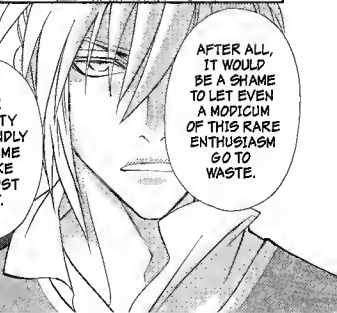
EXCELLENT.
THEN YOU CAN
DO THESE DOCU-
MENTS AS WELL.
AND ONCE YOU
FINISH THOSE,
THIS PILE AS
WELL, IF YOU
PLEASE.

*By pushing wildly
random odd
jobs on him,
I see.*



YOU
TRULY ARE A
FRIGHTFULLY
CAPABLE
SUBORDINATE,
AREN'T YOU,
KOYU?

YOUR
MAJESTY
WILL KINDLY
ALLOW ME
TO MAKE
THE MOST
OF IT.



AFTER ALL,
IT WOULD
BE A SHAME
TO LET EVEN
A MOPICUM
OF THIS RARE
ENTHUSIASM
GO TO
WASTE.



AH...
PLEASE WAIT
A LITTLE BIT
LONGER. WE
ARE STILL IN
THE PROCESS
OF REVISING
IT.

THAT
REMINDS ME,
YOUR
HIGHNESS—
HOW IS THE
DRAFT OF YOUR
PROPOSAL
GOING?



IT WOULD
BE THE
MOST
CERTAIN
WAY OF
ACCOMPLISH-
ING YOUR
GOAL.

AS YOU ARE NOW,
YOU HAVE FULL
AUTHORITY TO
ISSUE AN OFFICIAL
COMMAND TO BRING
HER BACK TO THE
INNER COURT. THAT'S
THE USUAL WAY
OF GOING ABOUT
IT, ISN'T IT?

IF I MAY ASK,
WHY ARE YOU
USING SUCH A
ROUNDABOUT
METHOD TO
BRING LADY
SHUREI BACK TO
YOUR SIDE?

IT ALSO
PROBABLY
MEANS SHE
DID NOT
WISH TO LIVE
HER LIFE
BOUND TO
US EITHER.

MEANING
SHE DID NOT
WISH TO
LIVE HER
LIFE BOUND
TO ITS
CONFINES.

SHUREI
CHOSE OF
HER OWN
WILL TO
LEAVE THE
INNER
COURT.



REALLY?

WE
DON'T
THINK
SO.



WE...
GET THE
SENSE
THAT IT
WOULD
BE A
DIFFERENT
KIND OF
ANGER.



BUT
WASN'T
SHE ANGRY
WITH YOU
ON A DAILY
BASIS WHILE
SHE STAYED
HERE
THIS PAST
SPRING?



IF WE
WERE TO FORCE
HER TO RETURN
TO THE INNER
COURT NOW,
SHUREI WOULD
CERTAINLY
BE ANGRY.



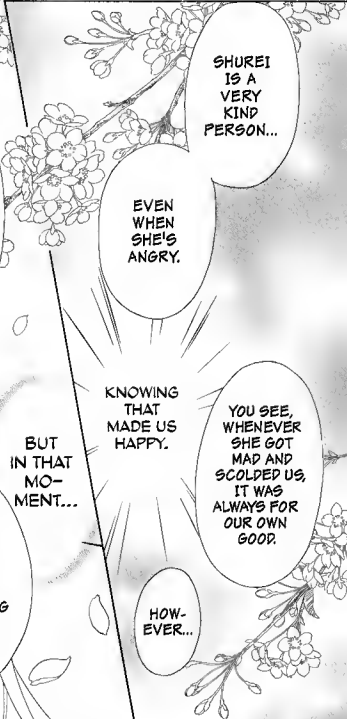
IT WOULD
BE MUCH
EASIER
SIMPLY TO
ORDER HER
BACK TO
THE INNER
COURT.

THERE
ARE THINGS
THAT CAN BE
FORGIVEN
AND THINGS
THAT CAN'T.

BUT
IN THAT
MO-
MENT...



IF WE
WERE TO
DO THAT,
WE FEEL
THAT...
SOMETHING
WOULD BE
BROKEN.



SHUREI
IS A
VERY
KIND
PERSON...

EVEN
WHEN
SHE'S
ANGRY.

KNOWING
THAT
MADE US
HAPPY.

YOU SEE,
WHENEVER
SHE GOT
MAD AND
SCOLDED US,
IT WAS
ALWAYS FOR
OUR OWN
GOOD.

HOW-
EVER...



SHE
REALLY
AND TRULY
HAS
NO WISH
FOR IT—
AT ALL!

LADY
SHUREI
DOES
NOT
INTEND
TO
RETURN
TO THE
INNER
COURT.

HE
UNDER-
STANDS
SUR-
PRISINGLY
WELL.

NOT WANTING TO
OBSTRUCT HER OWN
GOALS AND WISHES,
HE CHOSE THIS LONG,
SLOW COURSE INSTEAD
TO WIN HER HEART
LITTLE BY LITTLE.

THAT'S
PRECISELY WHY
HE CHOSE THIS
ROUNDABOUT
METHOD,
EVEN THOUGH
IT WOULD REQUIRE
INFINITE WORK
AND PATIENCE.

IF HE
HAD GIVEN
IN TO HIS
OWN
WISHES
AND MADE
HER
RETURN...

HIS
NATURAL
GENIUS FOR
WINNING
OVER WOMEN
MAY EVEN
SURPASS
MY OWN...

AND TO
THINK HE'S
DOING ALL
OF THIS INSTINC-
TIVELY...

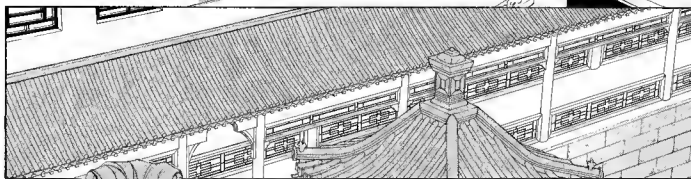
...THE
THING
HE WANTS
MOST
WOULD
TRULY HAVE
SLIPPED
BEYOND
HIS GRASP
FOR GOOD.



WELL,
I'M NOT
ONE TO
TALK.



HOWEVER,
HE'S STILL A
BEGINNER AND
HE'S ENDED UP
CHOOSING A
PARTICULARLY
DIFFICULT
OPPONENT.

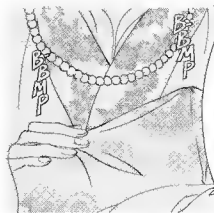


PARDON
THE
INTRU-
SION...

...MASTER
SHOKA.



ENTER.



YES...
I-I DON'T
THINK
THEY'LL BE
AS TASTY AS
THE ONES
LADY SHUREI
MAKES,
BUT...



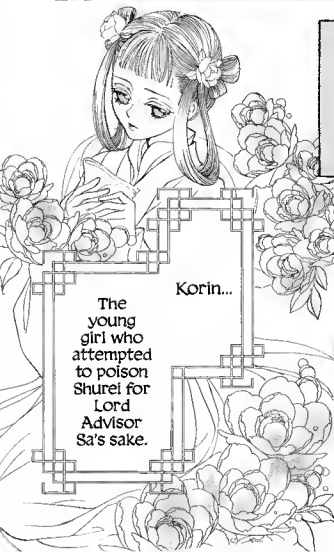
UM...
I BROUGHT
SOME
STEAMED
BUNS I
MADE.

STEAMED
BUNS?



I'LL PUT
SOME
HOT
WATER
ON FOR
TEA.

THESE
WILL
BE A
TREAT.



Korin...

The
young
girl who
attempted
to poison
Shurei for
Lord
Advisor
Sa's sake.



OH,
I'M
FINE.

GOING
ALL THE
WAY TO SA
PROVINCE
TO ESCORT
KORIN HOME...

YOU
MUST
STILL BE
RECOVER-
ING FROM
SUCH A
LONG
TRIP.

Upon
learning of
the incident,
Lord Advisor
Sa's widow,
Eiki Hyo,
requested
that Korin
be placed in
her care.

The
incident
was kept
from
public
knowl-
edge...

...as were
the circum-
stances of
Lord Advisor
Sa's death.
The official
story was that
he had died
of old age.

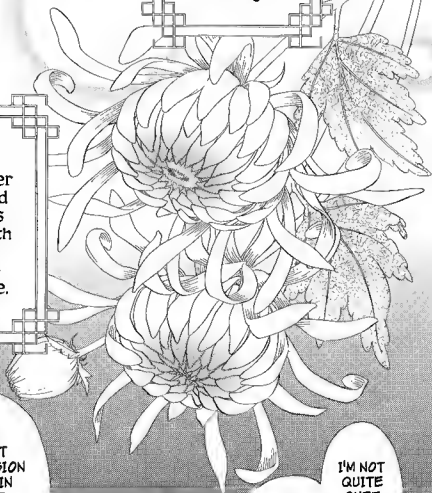
Ryuki
accepted her
request and
Shusui was
charged with
escorting
the girl to
Sa Province.

...SHE
MAKES
SUCH AN
IMPRESSION
THAT ONCE
YOU MEET
HER,
YOU CAN'T
FORGET
HER...

INDEED,
I HAVEN'T
HAD OCCASION
TO COME IN
CONTACT
WITH HER
MUCH OVER
THE YEARS,
BUT...

...BUT THAT
WOMAN
CERTAINLY
WASN'T
WHAT I WAS
EXPECT-
ING...

I'M NOT
QUITE
SURE
HOW TO
EXPLAIN
IT...





I
THINK
SHE'LL
BE ALL
RIGHT.

...AFTER ALL,
SHE LOVED
LORD ADVISOR SA
AS MUCH AS—
NO, I DARESAY
SHE LOVED
HIM MORE
THAN KORIN
DID.

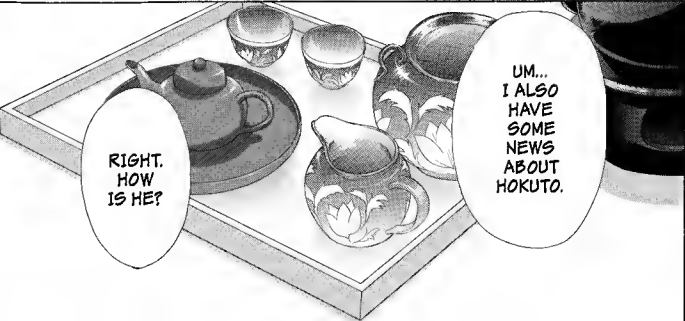
SHE'S A
VERY STRONG
WOMAN.
IF KORIN STAYS
BY HER SIDE,
SHE'S SURE TO
RECOVER...

YES.
I FEEL THAT
UNDER HER CARE,
KORIN WILL
SURELY BE
ABLE TO GET
BACK ON THE
RIGHT TRACK.

THAT'S
WHAT I
WANT TO
BELIEVE. IT
MIGHT JUST
BE WISHFUL
THINKING ON
MY PART.



YOU'RE
RIGHT...



RIGHT.
HOW
IS HE?

UM...
I ALSO
HAVE
SOME
NEWS
ABOUT
HOKUTO.

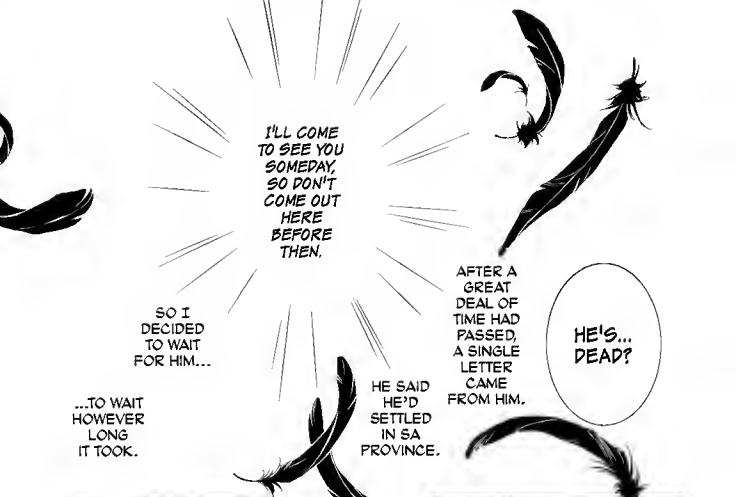
HOW MANY TIMES DID
WE SPEED THROUGH
THE PITCH-BLACK NIGHT
TOGETHER AS THE
WOLVES OF THE WIND?
I CAN'T EVEN COUNT
THE NUMBER OF TIMES
WE PLACED OUR
LIVES IN EACH
OTHER'S HANDS...

HOKUTO.

THAT MAN
WAS AN
IRREPLACEABLE
COMRADE
AND FRIEND
TO ME...

WHEN I
DISBANDED
THE WOLVES
OF THE WIND,
HIS EYES
TOOK ON A
FARAWAY GAZE.
I COULDN'T
SEE WHAT HE
SAW. THEN,
LIKE THE WIND,
HE MELTED
AWAY...





I'LL COME
TO SEE YOU
SOMEDAY,
SO DON'T
COME OUT
HERE
BEFORE
THEN.

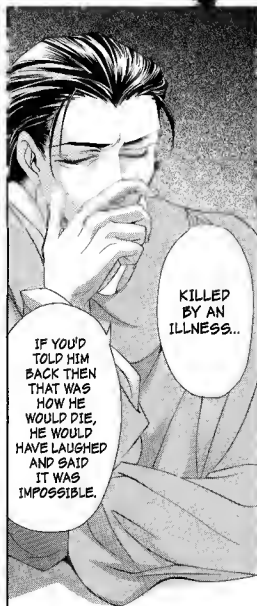
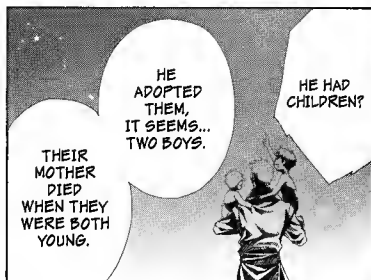
SO I
DECIDED
TO WAIT
FOR HIM...

...TO WAIT
HOWEVER
LONG
IT TOOK.

AFTER A
GREAT
DEAL OF
TIME HAD
PASSED,
A SINGLE
LETTER
CAME
FROM HIM.

HE'S...
DEAD?

HE SAID
HE'D
SETTLED
IN SA
PROVINCE.



I
SEE.

I
KNOW
I WON'T
HAVE A
PEACEFUL
DEATH.

TO THINK
THAT THE
HOKUTO WE
ONCE KNEW
WOULD BE
CARED FOR BY
CHILDREN
SOMEDAY...

KILL
OR BE
KILLED—
THAT'S
THE WAY I
LIVE MY
LIFE.

OH,
HOKUTO...
WITH THOSE
EYES THAT
WERE ALWAYS
HUNGRY
SOMEHOW...

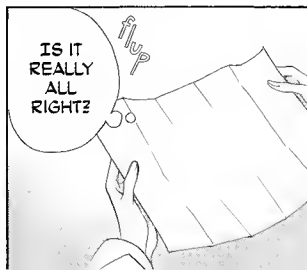
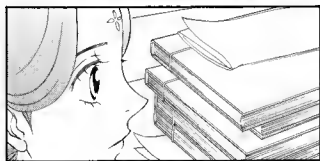
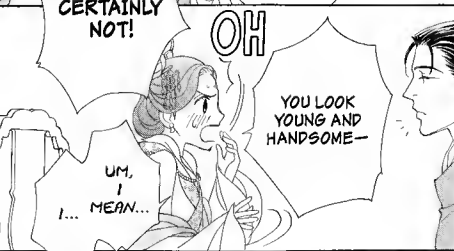
...AND
THAT
LAUGH
THAT
ALWAYS
HELD AN
EDGE OF
BITTERNESS
TO IT...

TO
THINK
A MAN
LIKE
THAT...

TIME
TRULY
IS A
POWERFUL
THING.

AT THE
MOMENT
OF
DEATH...

...I'M
SURE
HIS EYES
WERE
FINALLY...





YES,
THAT'S
HOW I
READ
IT.

ISN'T
THAT
AMUSING?

IT SEEMS
TO SAY THAT
HIS MAJESTY
INTENDS TO
ENGAGE IN A
MIDNIGHT TRYST
WITH LADY
SHUREI...

UH,
MASTER
SHOKA...?



WELL,
YES,
IT DOES
SAY THAT,
BUT...

HE WROTE
THAT HE SIMPLY
WANTS TO HAVE
A DISCREET
EVENING MEAL
AND VISIT WITH
US, DOESN'T
IT?



ARE YOU
CERTAIN
THIS
IS ALL
RIGHT?!



BUT
WHAT IF
HE REALLY
INTENDS—

Peek

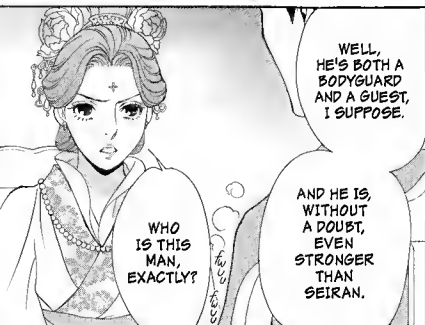


IN ANY
CASE,
SEIRAN
WILL BE
HERE AS
WELL.

I ALSO
HAVE
ANOTHER
STAYING
ON AT THE
HOUSE AS
BODYGUARD
OF SORTS.

HUH?

I PRAY
THAT HIS
MAJESTY
WON'T
ACT TOO
RASHLY!



WELL,
HE'S BOTH A
BODYGUARD
AND A GUEST,
I SUPPOSE.

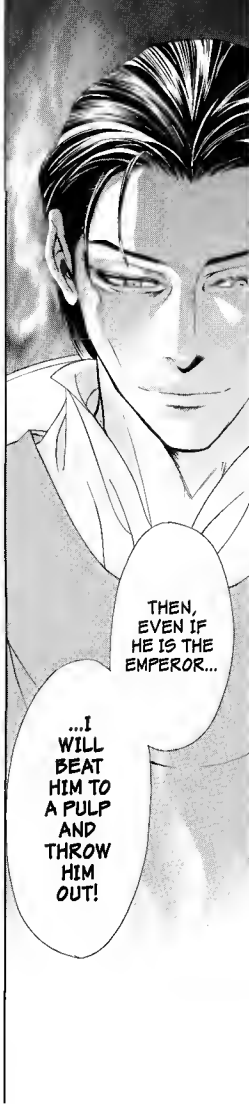
AND HE IS,
WITHOUT
A DOUBT,
EVEN
STRONGER
THAN
SEIRAN.

WHO
IS THIS
MAN,
EXACTLY?



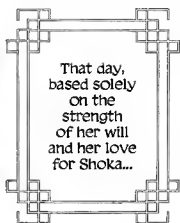
SHALL
I POUR
US
SOME
TEA?

I HAVE A
FEELING WE'LL
BE ABLE TO
CONFIRM THAT
ONCE I HEAR
THE REST OF
YOUR REPORT
ON SA
PROVINCE.



THEN,
EVEN IF
HE IS THE
EMPEROR...

...I
WILL
BEAT
HIM TO
A PULP
AND
THROW
HIM
OUT!



...Shusui
downed cup
after cup of
the infamous
"Daddy Tea"
that even
Shoka's own
daughter
would not
drink.

That day,
based solely
on the
strength
of her will
and her love
for Shoka...



HOJU...?

OUR
OFFICE
SEEMS SO
LONELY
WITHOUT
OUR TWO
ENERGETIC
HELPERS.



OH,
COME NOW.
IT'S ALL
RIGHT WHEN
IT'S JUST THE
TWO OF US,
ISN'T IT?

DO NOT
CALL ME
BY THAT
NAME.



...

I COULD
NEVER
CALL YOU
BY SOME
SILLY NAME
LIKE
"KIJIN."

AFTER ALL,
WE'VE
WORKED
TOGETHER
FOR OVER
TEN YEARS
NOW.



MAYBE...
WE SHOULD
TALK TO VICE
MINISTER RI
ABOUT LETTING
US KEEP
THOSE TWO ON
PERMANENTLY?

EVEN IF WE
ABSOLUTELY
COULDN'T
KEEP ENSEI...
PERHAPS
AT LEAST
SHU...

EVEN
DOING THE
TREASURE
ROOM
INSPECTION
ON MY OWN
FEELS A BIT
STRANGE.



WHY
DO YOU
SAY
THAT?

NO.
THAT
WOULDN'T
BE
POSSIBLE.



HAVE YOU
REALLY NOT
NOTICED?

NOTICED
WHAT?



WHY?

MR
YOU'RE
MAKING AN
INCREDULOUS
FACE AT ME
UNDER THAT
MASK,
AREN'T YOU?



DO YOU REMEMBER
THE
EMPEROR'S
SUDDEN
PROPOSAL
CONCERNING
THE IMPERIAL
CIVIL
EXAM?



NEVER
MIND.



I HAD A
TERRIBLE
TIME OF IT,
MAKING
EXCUSES
FOR YOU
AFTERWARD.

UPON
HEARING IT,
YOU TURNED
AND LEFT
THE HALL
WITHOUT
A WORD.

OF
COURSE.



IT'S ALL
RIGHT.
I'M USED
TO IT BY
NOW.

SORRY.



WHY IS
IT THAT
YOU ALWAYS
KNOW
PRECISELY
WHAT I'M
ABOUT TO
SAY?



KEEN

AH, YOU
MEAN THE
MINISTER
OF CIVIL
AFFAIRS'S
REACTION?

THERE'S
SOMETHING
ABOUT
IT THAT
BOTHERS
ME.



THOUGH
HE DIDN'T
MAKE ANY
SIGN OF
APPROVAL
EITHER.

I TOO FOUND
IT SURPRISING
THAT THE
MINISTER OF
CIVIL AFFAIRS
DIDN'T MAKE
A SIMILAR
SHOW OF
DISAPPROVAL
LIKE YOU DID



I'VE BEEN
BY YOUR SIDE
SINCE BEFORE
YOU BEGAN
WEARING THAT
MASK. NATURALLY
I KNOW YOU
WELL ENOUGH TO
GUESS THAT
MUCH.



CALLING
HIM A VILE
DEGENERATE
IS MORE
THAN
FITTING!!

DON'T
BE A FOOL!
WHO WOULD
CALL THAT
MAN A
FRIEND?!



IT'S LIKELY
THAT VILE
DEGENERATE
HOLDS SOME
SHRED OF
INFORMATION
WE DON'T.

This
again...



Wah
Wah
Wah
CATCH
THEM!

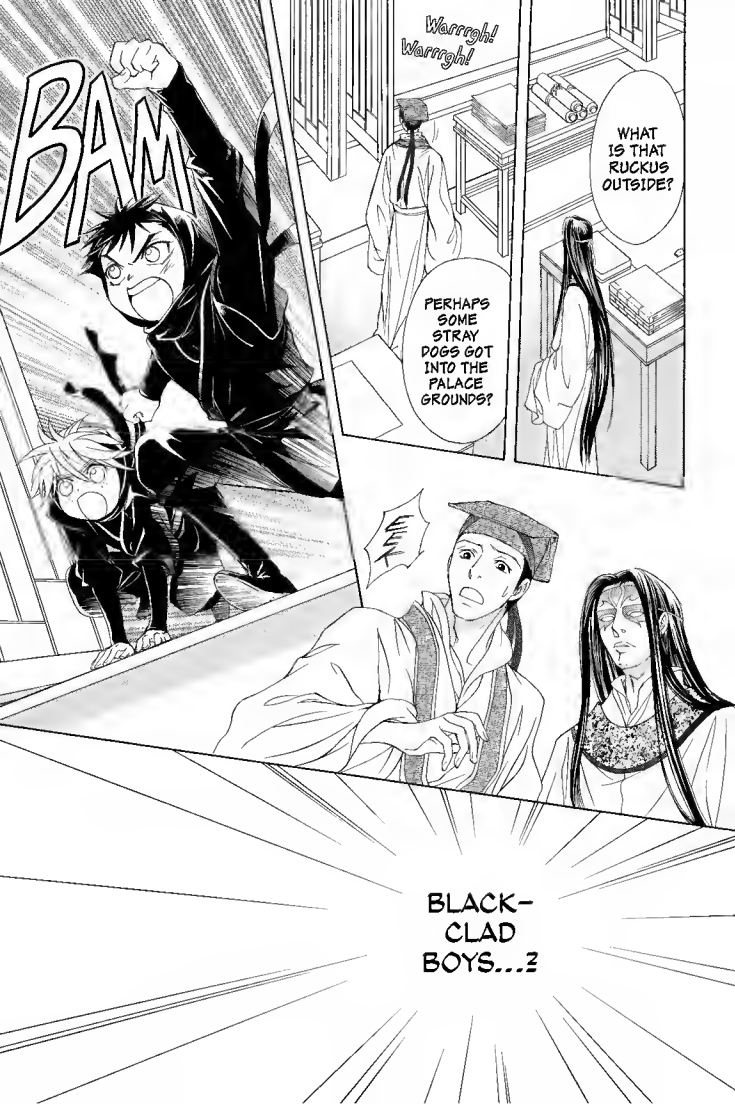
THEY
WENT
THAT
WAY!

HE'S
ALWAYS SO
ICILY CALM
EXCEPT WHEN
IT COMES TO
THE MINISTER
OF CIVIL
AFFAIRS...

Sigh



VILE DEGEN-
ERATE...?
BUT ISN'T
HE ONE OF
YOUR VERY
FEW FRIENDS
WHO IS ABLE
TO GAZE
UNDISTURBED
UPON YOUR
BARE FACE?



BAM

Warrgh!
Warrgh!

WHAT
IS THAT
RUCKUS
OUTSIDE?

PERHAPS
SOME
STRAY
DOGS GOT
INTO THE
PALACE
GROUNDS?

BLACK-
CLAD
BOYS...?



HOW
TERRIBLY
SUS-
PICIOUS...

HOW DID
THEY SPOT US
SO FAST?!
OUR SUPER-
STEALTH
INFILTRATION
WENT OFF WITH-
OUT A HITCH!

AND AFTER
WE SPENT OUR
REMAINING MONEY
TO GET THESE
NEW BLACK
CLOTHES!
IT SURE IS
STRANGE...

IT SEEMS
LIKE WE'RE
GETTING LOST
DEEPER
AND DEEPER
IN THE PALACE
NOW...

YEAH.
I WONDER
WHERE
WE ARE.

Gyuuuuu
H

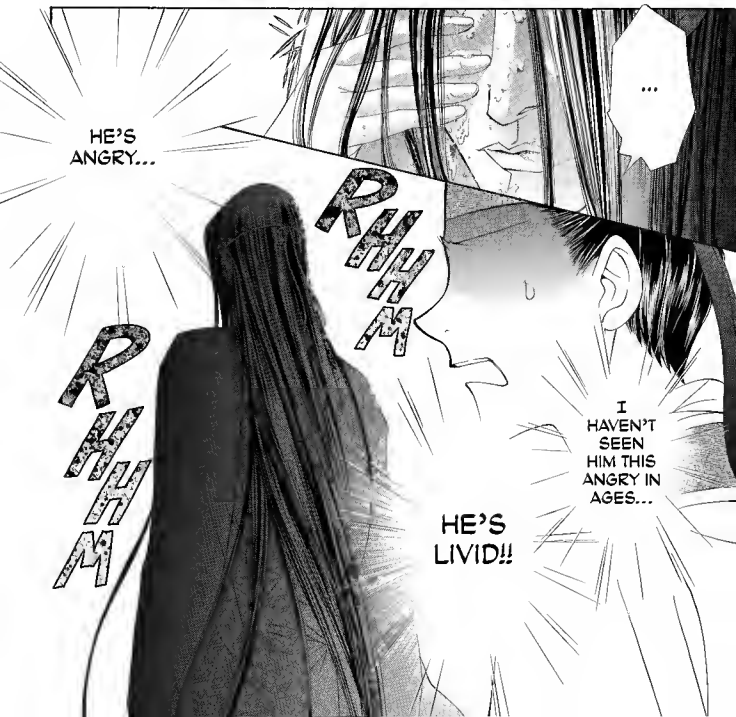




CLOSE
ENOUGH!

THOUGH
IT MUST
BE A
POWERFUL
DEMON TO
COME OUT
DURING
THE DAY!

U-UM...
I-ISN'T THAT
WHAT YOU
USE AGAINST
GHOSTS OR
SLUGS?



HE'S
ANGRY...

...

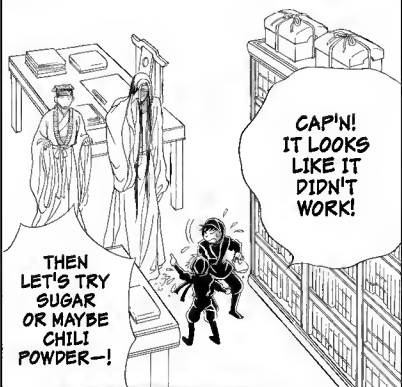
I
HAVEN'T
SEEN
HIM THIS
ANGRY IN
AGES...

HE'S
LIVID!!



...YOU SHOULD JUST GO RIGHT NOW AND TURN YOURSELVES OVER TO THE GUARDS, ALL RIGHT?

LISTEN, BOYS... NO ONE WILL BE MAD AT YOU, SO...



THEN LET'S TRY SUGAR OR MAYBE CHILI POWDER—!

CAP'IN!
IT LOOKS LIKE IT DIDN'T WORK!



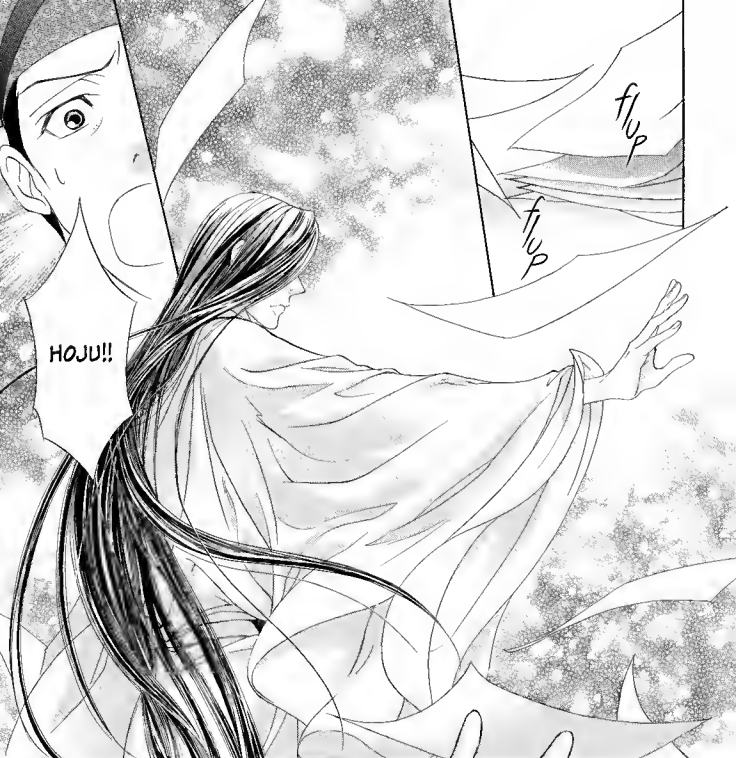
SO NOW YOU SHOW YOUR TRUE FACE, YOU MASKED...



Oh no!

YOU MUSTN'T!





HOJU!!

f1up

f1up



OH

YOU ARE
A QIGONG
MASTER!
CONTROL YOUR
TEMPER...!

PLEASE
LET
THEM
BE!



DON'T
LOOK
INTO ITS
EYES!

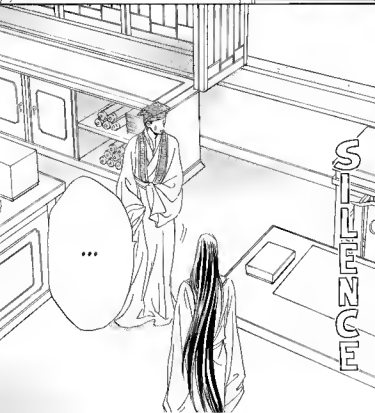
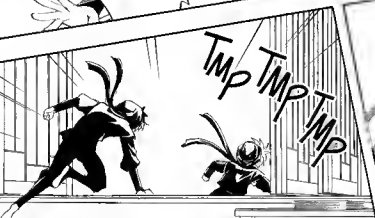
THAT
DEMON
IS
TRYING
TO TURN
US TO
STONE!

VISH



I KNOW!
ITS MASK
WAS SO
MUCH
BETTER
THAN ITS
FACE!







HA
HA

MAKING
ME TAKE
MY MASK
OFF...



CON-
FOUNDED
LITTLE...

THEY
WERE
QUICK
IN THEIR
ESCAPE.

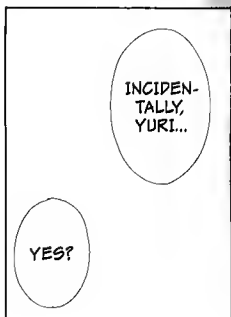


THOUGH
I GET THE
FEELING
ENSEI WOULD
GIVE ONE
GOOD LAUGH
AND THEN
SIMPLY CARRY
ON WITH HIS
WORK.

IN-
DEED.

WE ARE
FORTUNATE
THAT THOSE
TWO WERE
NOT
SCHEDULED
TO WORK
TODAY.

THIS
IS NO
LAUGHING
MATTER,
YURI.



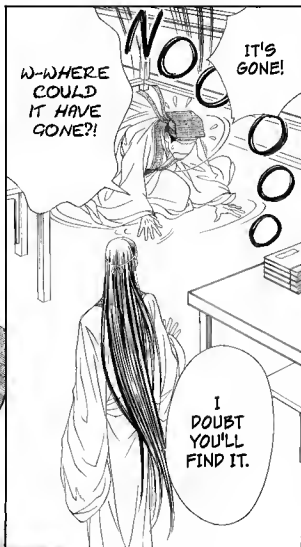
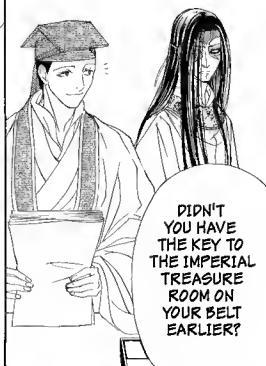
INCIDEN-
TALLY,
YURI...

YES?



BUT I'M SURE
HE WOULD MAKE A
SUPREME EFFORT
TO PRETEND HE
HADN'T SEEN
ANYTHING AND GO
ABOUT AS USUAL,
DON'T YOU THINK?

SHU
WOULD
PROBABLY
BE QUITE
SHOCKED.





**HOW
CAN YOU
REMAIN
SO
CALM?!**

**THAT WAS
THE ONLY
KEY IN THE
ENTIRE
COUNTRY
TO THE
IMPERIAL
TREASURE
ROOM!!**



HO!
ALL
RIGHT
THEN!

SO WHAT
WOULD
YOU LIKE
FOR
DINNER
TONIGHT?

ANYTHING
YOU WANT.
I'M BRIBING
YOU TO KEEP
QUIET ABOUT
WHAT WE
TALKED ABOUT
EARLIER.

WELL,
HOW ABOUT
YOU PICK
SOMETHING
GOOD WHILE
WE'RE
HEADING
HOME?

HUH?



HMM... HOW
ABOUT SOME
WILD MOUNTAIN
VEGGIES?
A STIR-FRY WITH
MUSHROOMS
AND GREENS
AND...

THAT
SOUNDS
HEALTHY.
IS THAT
ALL YOU
WANT?

You
probably
know what
ingredients
to add
better
than
I do.



HE
COL-
LAPSED!

Ugh!



WHY
WOULD
ANYONE
WEAR THAT
IN THIS
SCORCHING
HEAT?

THERE
ARE SOME
ODD PEOPLE
APPROACH-
ING.

ee



THOSE
TWO...!

WE
HAVE
TO
HELP!!



YOSHUN!

HEY!
YOSHUN!



DASH

PRIN-
CESS-



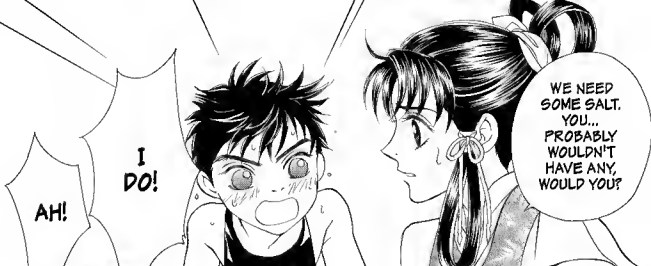
THIS
IS NO
TIME
FOR
GAMES!

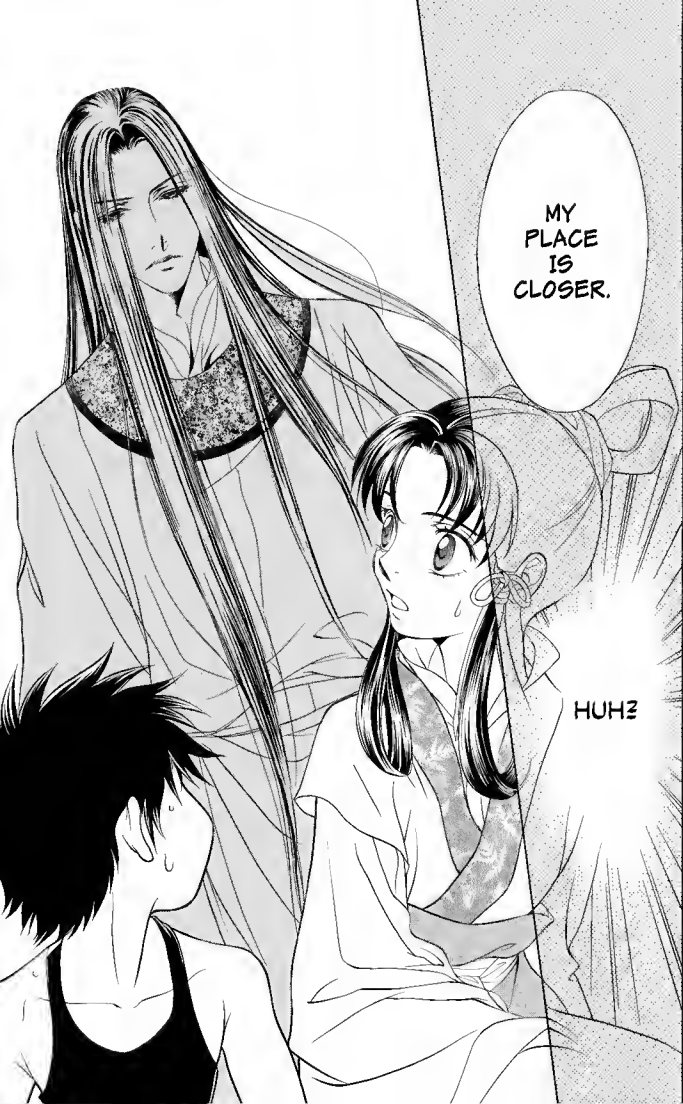


NEVER
MIND.
SHE WON'T
LISTEN
ANYWAY...

Here
we
go...

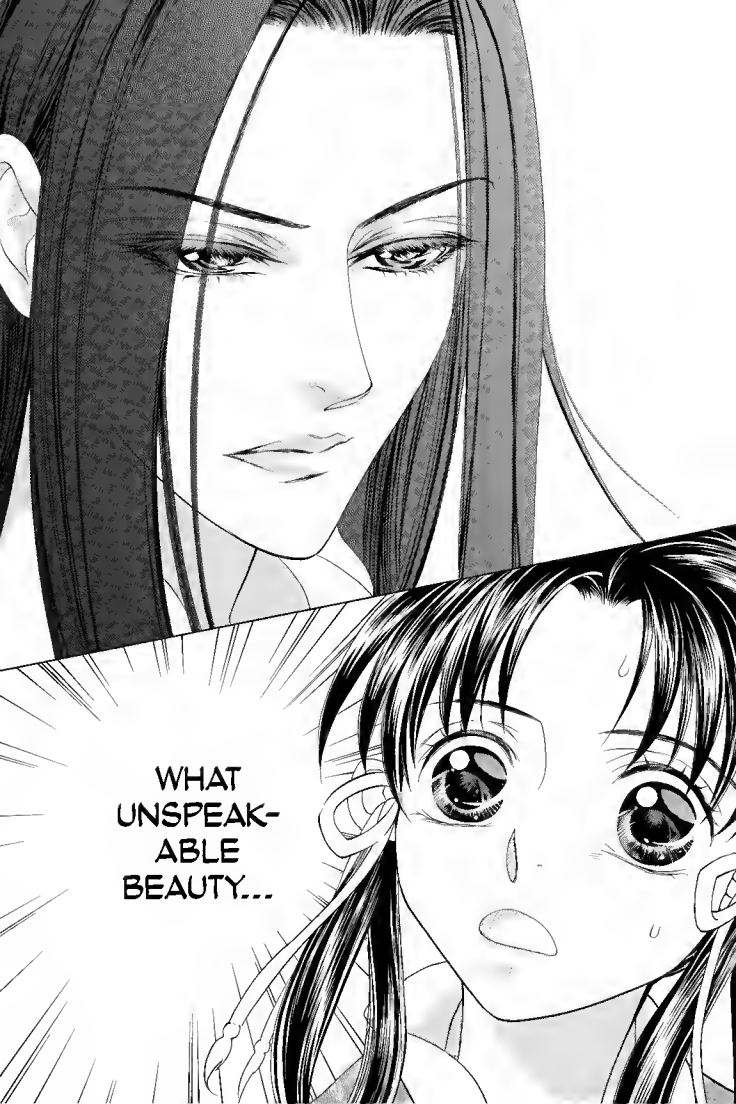






MY
PLACE
IS
CLOSER.

HUH?



WHAT
UNSPEAK-
ABLE
BEAUTY...

EVEN THAT
PERSON'S
MOVEMENTS
ARE ELEGANT.
THE WAY
HE LIFTS
THE BOY...

P
L
U
P

UNBE-
LIEVABLE.

IT...
IT'S A
MAN...?

YOU'RE
THAT
MASKED—

OH

VEEN
N

EEK!

SILENCE
YOURSELF
IF YOU WISH
TO SAVE
THIS BOY.



YOU
FINISHED
ALL THE
"HOMEWORK"
I SENT BACK
WITH YOU,
I TRUST.



S-SURE...

I
WILL GO
CALL MY
CARRIAGE.
WAIT
HERE.

IT
CAN'T
BE
HIM!



hhuu

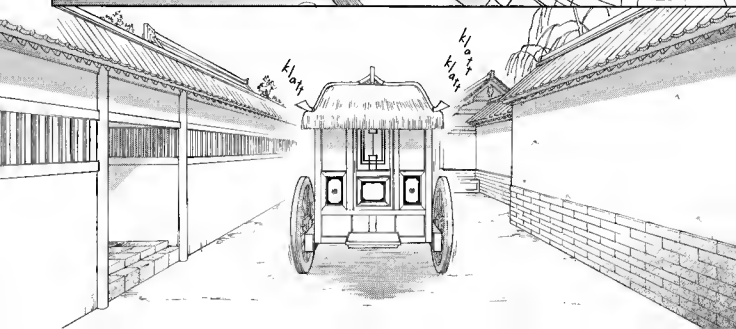
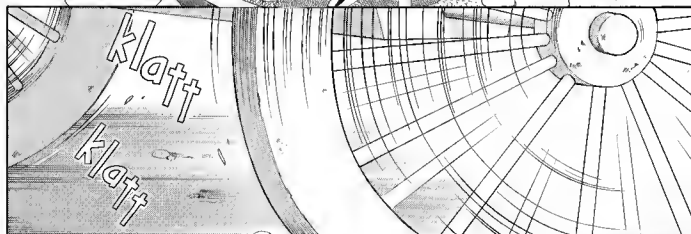
Chapter 14

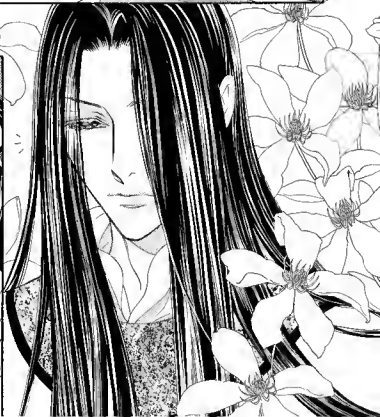
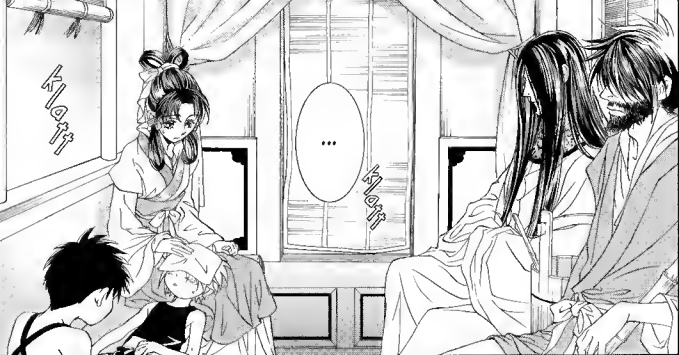


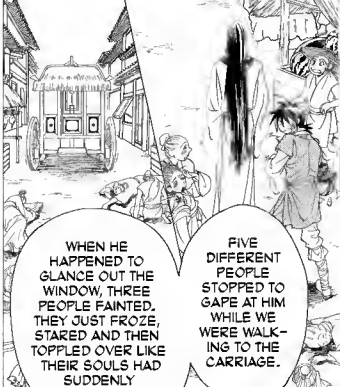


Kiyo,
the
capital
city of
Saiunkoku.

With the
palace of the
Imperial family
(the Shi clan)
placed at its
center, the rest
of the city
is divided into
seven districts
known as the
Seven Colored
Wards.







WHEN HE
HAPPENED TO
GLANCE OUT THE
WINDOW, THREE
PEOPLE FAINED.
THEY JUST FROZE,
STARED AND THEN
TOPPLED OVER LIKE
THEIR SOULS HAD
SUDDENLY
DEPARTED.

FIVE
DIFFERENT
PEOPLE
STOPPED TO
GAPE AT HIM
WHILE WE
WERE WALK-
ING TO THE
CARRIAGE.



I'D
PROBABLY
WEAR A
MASK TOO
IF I WERE
HIM...

It was
only that few
because there
aren't many folks
out in this
heat...

THAT
FACE OF
HIS IS
LIKE A
WEAPON...!

IF HE'D
BEEN BORN
A WOMAN,
THE ENTIRE
COUNTRY
WOULD HAVE
FALLEN
TO RUIN!

IT'S A
GOOD
THING
HE WAS
BORN A
MAN.



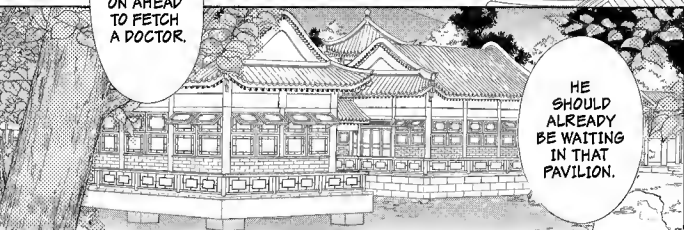
IT
SHOULD
BE
BANNED
FROM
COURT.



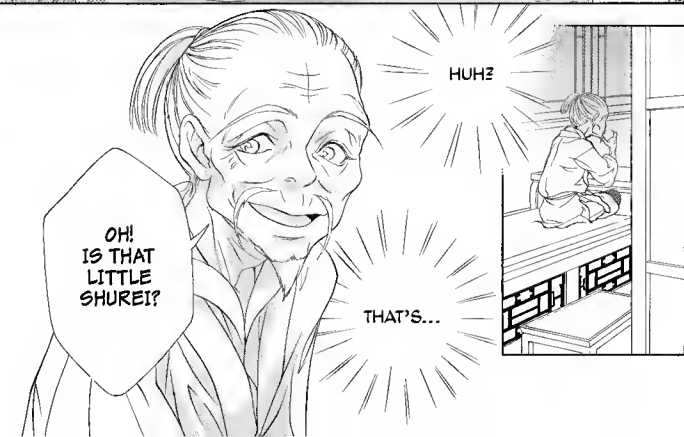
FOLLOW
ME.

OH...
THIS IS
THE BACK
GATE,
ISN'T IT?

I SENT
SERVANTS
ON AHEAD
TO FETCH
A DOCTOR.



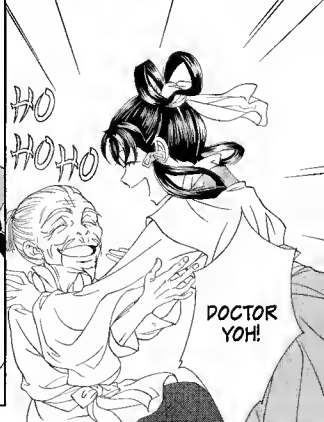
HE
SHOULD
ALREADY
BE WAITING
IN THAT
PAVILION.



HUH?

OH!
IS THAT
LITTLE
SHUREI?

THAT'S...





I
KNEW
IT WAS
YOU
TWO...

HOW
DO YOU
KNOW MY
NAME?



YOU...

AREN'T
YOU
SHORIN?



REMEMBER
YOUR
TARGET
AT LEAST,
BLOCKHEAD!

AND WHAT
EXACTLY DID
THE TWO OF
YOU COME ALL
THE WAY OUT
HERE TO DO
AGAIN?

Take
a good
look.



ARGH!
WE WERE
SO BUSY
SIGHTSEEING
THAT WE
COMPLETELY
FORGOT
ABOUT YOU!

THAT'S
PRETTY
MUCH
WHAT I
SUS-
PECTED.



OHH!!
I-IT'S
YOU!

THE MAN
WITH THE
CROSS-
SHAPED
SCAR ON
HIS LEFT
CHEEK!!



WELL?
WHAT'RE
YOU GOING
TO DO?
TRY TO
FIGHT ME?



UM...
SHOULDN'T
THAT BE
"NEVER GO
BACK ON A DEBT
OF GRATITUDE"?
I THINK YOU'VE
MISTAKEN YOUR
DAD'S WORDS.



YOU
ALL ARE
TRYING
TO SAVE
YOSHUN.

OUR DAD
TAUGHT US
NEVER TO GET
BACK ON A DEBT
OF GRATITUDE
WE OWE
SOMEONE.

WE'LL
GIVE
UP.

t
o
m
p



AHH.
WELL,
THAT'S
THAT.

Pom
Pom
Pom



WHAT'D
YOU
SAY?!

HE HAD
JUST A
MILD CASE
OF HEAT-
STROKE.

Hm?

EH? NOT
AT ALL.
HE'S COM-
PLETELY
FINE NOW.

WAIT,
VENERABLE
DOCTOR,
YOU'RE NOT
SAYING IT'S
TOO LATE
FOR POOR
YOSHUN...?!

THAT
WAS
FAST!

NO, DON'T
TRY TO EASE
THE BLOW!
I, SHORIN—MAN
AMONG MEN—
HAVE PREPARED
MYSELF EVEN
FOR THIS ONE-
IN-A-MILLION
EVENTUALITY...!

JUST
HOW
BAD IS
IT?

THIS
KID IS
TROUBLE...

O
VENER-
ABLE
DOCTOR...

TELL
ME THE
TRUTH!

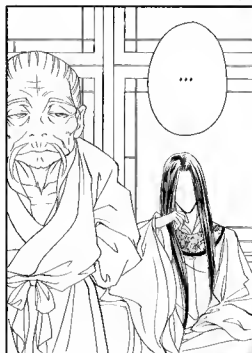
THEN
YOSHUN'S
LIFE WILL
BE SAVED
IN THE NICK
OF TIME!
RIGHT,
VENERABLE
DOCTOR,
SIR?!

THERE IS A TYPE
OF PERENNIAL FLOWER
CALLED THE SEKIKOKU
ORCHID THAT GROWS
IN THE HILLS BEHIND
THIS HOUSE. IF IT IS
BREWED INTO A
MEDICINE AND
THEN GIVEN TO
THE BOY—

TELL ME!
I'LL DO
WHAT-
EVER IT
TAKES!

ALL
RIGHT.
THERE'S
ONLY ONE
WAY TO
SAVE HIM.

ALERT



...

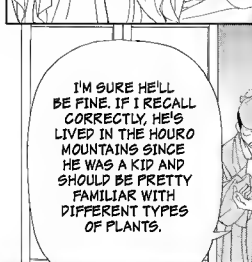


IT IS
BUT A
SMALL
QUEST
TO
UNDER-
TAKE!

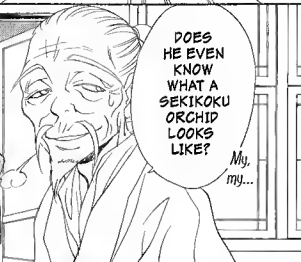
I SHALL
RETURN
WITH THE
FLOWERS
BEFORE
DAWN!!



VISH



I'M SURE HE'LL
BE FINE. IF I RECALL
CORRECTLY, HE'S
LIVED IN THE HOURO
MOUNTAINS SINCE
HE WAS A KID AND
SHOULD BE PRETTY
FAMILIAR WITH
DIFFERENT TYPES
OF PLANTS.



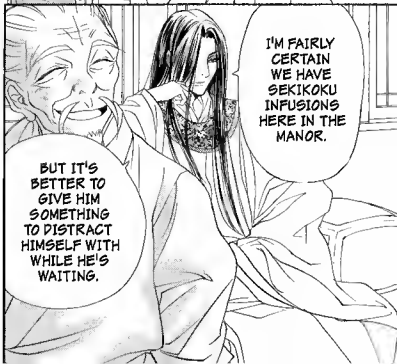
DOES
HE EVEN
KNOW
WHAT A
SEKIKOKU
ORCHID
LOOKS
LIKE?

My,
my...



AND
YOU
KNOW...

twinkle

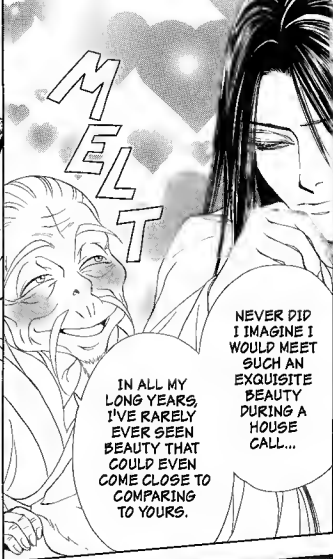
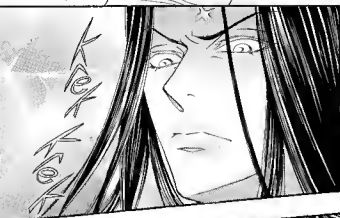


I'M FAIRLY
CERTAIN
WE HAVE
SEKIKOKU
INFUSIONS
HERE IN THE
MANOR.

BUT IT'S
BETTER TO
GIVE HIM
SOMETHING
TO DISTRACT
HIMSELF WITH
WHILE HE'S
WAITING.



BUT WHY IN THE WORLD AREN'T YOU A WOMAN?

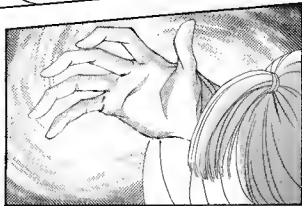


NEVER DID I IMAGINE I WOULD MEET SUCH AN EXQUISITE BEAUTY DURING A HOUSE CALL...

IN ALL MY LONG YEARS, I'VE RARELY EVER SEEN BEAUTY THAT COULD EVEN COME CLOSE TO COMPARING TO YOURS.



Right?



Huh?



WHOA!





IN TRUTH,
I JUST SENT
A MESSAGE
TELLING
EVERYONE
THAT WE'D BE
STAYING HERE
TONIGHT.

WELL
YES,
BUT...



IT'S
OKAY,
SURELY?

FOR-
GIVE
ME!

I'M
SORRY!

The house
will get
destroyed if
I leave them
in charge!

WHAT?!
BUT
WHY?

THE
MASTER
OF THE
HOUSE
SO KINDLY
INVITED US
TO STAY...



HE
DID?



THANK YOU
FOR YOUR
HOSPITALITY
TO
STRANGERS
SUCH AS
US, SIR.

WE
ACCEPT
YOUR KIND
INVITATION
TO STAY
THE NIGHT.



He's
taken
a liking
to us
already?

I
SUPPOSE
THERE'S
NO HELPING
IT AS YOU
ALREADY
SENT OFF
THE
MESSAGE.



AND JUST
WHEN DID
I INVITE
YOU LOT
TO SPEND
THE NIGHT
HERE...

...ENSEI?



SHUREI,
WOULD YOU
COME HERE
FOR A
MOMENT?

YES,
DOCTOR.



ENSEI,
PLEASE
DON'T
TROUBLE
OUR
HOST.

RIGHT.

IF I CAUSE
ANY KIND OF
RUCKUS OVER
AT SHOKA'S
HOUSE, THERE'S
A GUY
THERE WHO'LL
KILL ME.

THANKS TO THAT
LITTLE SCENE WE
ALL MADE IN THE
STREET EARLIER,
I WAS SPOTTED BY
CERTAIN RABBLE,
AND I'M PRETTY SURE
THEY'LL BE CLOSING
IN ON ME TONIGHT
FOR A FINAL
SHOWDOWN.



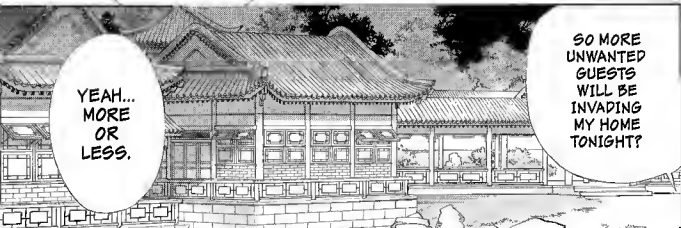
OH, UM...
HA HA HA.
THANKS
FOR
LETTING
US STAY.

WHY?



YEAH...
MORE
OR
LESS.

SO MORE
UNWANTED
GUESTS
WILL BE
INVADING
MY HOME
TONIGHT?

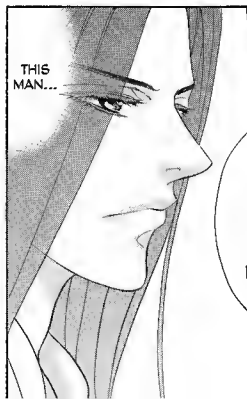


SO
THAT'S WHY
IT SUDDENLY
OCCURRED TO
ME THAT THIS
WOULD BE THE
PERFECT PLACE
TO RECEIVE SOME
UNWELCOME
GUESTS
TONIGHT.

EVEN BETTER,
YOU'RE HIGH-
RANKING,
WISE AND CAN
OBVIOUSLY BE
DISCREET. AFTER
ALL, YOU ALREADY
KNOW WHO I
REALLY AM,
DON'T YOU?

THE GROUNDS
HERE ARE
EXPANSIVE, SO
THERE'S PLENTY OF
ROOM TO MANUEVER.
ALSO, IF A LITTLE
DAMAGE IS CAUSED
TO THE BUILDINGS
IN THE PROCESS,
YOU'VE GOT THE
MONEY FOR
REPAIRS.







OF
COURSE.
I'LL
HANDLE
IT.

DO AS
YOU
PLEASE.

BUT KNOW
I HAVE NO
INTENTION
OF COMING
TO YOUR
AID.



WH-WHY?!

WHY
TONIGHT
OF ALL
NIGHTS?!

TWO WHO
CAME ALONG
BECAUSE

I
DOUBT
THEY WERE
A DESTINED
COUPLE
TO BEGIN
WITH.

THEY
THOUGHT IT
WOULD BE
AMUSING...

PERHAPS
THE RED
STRING
OF FATE
CONNECTING
THEM WAS
TRULY
SEVERED...

HIS
HIGHNESS
DOESN'T
SEEM TO
HAVE LUCK
ON HIS
SIDE.

I TRULY
APOLOGIZE,
YOUR
MAJESTY.

I
INTENDED
TO TELL MY
DAUGHTER
OF YOUR VISIT
AS SOON AS
SHE CAME
HOME, BUT...

IF IT
HAS BEEN
SEVERED,
WE WILL
RETIE IT!

WE ARE
GOING
TO THE
ADDRESS
IN THIS
LETTER!

OWAR

SHALL
WE GIVE
IT UP AND
HEAD BACK
TO THE
PALACE,
THEN?

AN OLD
FRIEND
OF MINE.

HE'S
FREE-
LOADING
HERE.

AND
JUST
WHO IS
THIS
"ENSEI"?!



I'LL
BE ON
MY
WAY.

IF YOU
INTEND TO
COME AS WELL,
MY LORDS,
PLEASE BE
SURE TO
BRING A
SWORD WITH
YOU.



YOUR
FRIEND,
SEIRAN?



SO IF
YOU'RE
ALL
RIGHT
WITH
THAT...

THIS WILL
LIKELY
TAKE THE
ENTIRE
NIGHT.



BASED ON
THE WANTED
POSTERS
THEY'VE PUT UP
EVERYWHERE,
WE KNOW
THERE ARE
STILL PLENTY
OF THEM OUT
THERE.

I DID FIND
IT ODD WE
DIDN'T HEAR
SO MUCH AS
A PEEP OUT OF
OUR NORMALLY
RAUCOUS BANDIT
FRIENDS
TODAY.



IS
SOME-
THING
HAPPENING
THERE?

SURELY
YOU DIDN'T
KEEP QUIET
ABOUT YOUR
FRIEND IN THE
HOPES THAT
SOMETHING
LIKE THIS
WOULD
HAPPEN?

You
used
him as
bait?

GENERAL RAN,
IF I MANAGED
TO CAPTURE
AND DELIVER ALL
THE REMAINING
BANDITS IN THE
CITY IN A SINGLE
NIGHT, WOULD
YOU GIVE ME
A REWARD?

IT'S BECAUSE
THE MAN
THEY'VE BEEN
PURSUING AND
OUR FREELOADING
HOUSEGUEST
SHARE A RATHER
CONSPICUOUS
TRAIT.

I'M SURE
THEY'VE
DETERMINED
THAT HE'S
THE ONE
THEY'VE
BEEN
AFTER.

SEI-
RAN...

Why
didn't you
mention this
before...?

THIS
MEANS...

...SHUREI,
WHO IS WITH
THIS MAN,
IS NOW ALSO
IN DANGER!

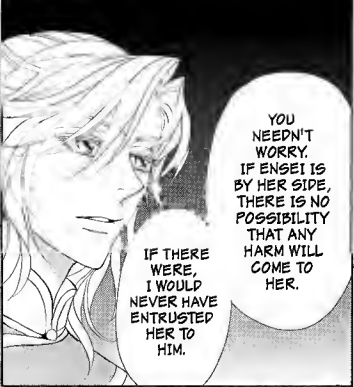
IT'S
JUST A
FORTUITOUS
COINCIDENCE.

OF
COURSE
NOT.



I DON'T
KNOW
IF I'D
CALL IT
BELIEF..

YOU
CERTAINLY
BELIEVE
IN THIS
FRIEND OF
YOURS.



YOU
NEEDN'T
WORRY.
IF ENSEI IS
BY HER SIDE,
THERE IS NO
POSSIBILITY
THAT ANY
HARM WILL
COME TO
HER.

IF THERE
WERE,
I WOULD
NEVER HAVE
ENTRUSTED
HER TO
HIM.

...WHEN IT
COMES TO
STAFF FIGHTING
OR HAND-TO-HAND
COMBAT, I TRULY
BELIEVE HE IS
THE GREATEST
IN THE ENTIRE
COUNTRY OF
SAIUNKOKU.

I WOULD
RATHER
DIE THAN
SAY IT TO
HIS FACE,
BUT...

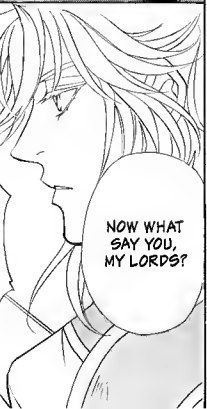
ASIDE FROM
THE ONE WHO
TRAINED HIM,
I HAVE
NEVER MET
ANY FIGHTER
STRONGER
THAN HE.



MY
THOUGHTS
EXACTLY.



WE WILL
COME ALONG,
OF COURSE!
WHAT POINT
WOULD THERE
HAVE BEEN IN
COMING HERE
OTHERWISE?!



NOW WHAT
SAY YOU,
MY LORDS?



DON'T
COMPLAIN
IF I
HIT YOU
TOO.



I SUPPOSE
I'LL THROW
ROCKS OR
SOME SUCH
AT THE ENEMY
AND CHEER
YOU ON FROM
BEHIND.

WHAT
WILL
YOU DO,
KOYU?



WE
WILL BE
CERTAIN
TO RETURN
BY
TOMORROW
MORNING.



THAT
BEING THE
SITUATION,
PLEASE
TAKE CARE
OF THE HOUSE
AND EXCUSE
US FOR THE
NIGHT.



WELL!
THAT'S
CERTAINLY
HEARTEN-
ING!

Hmph!



WE'LL
BE ON
OUR
WAY
NOW.

YES, I
REMEMBER
HOW
FEARSOME
MADAM'S
"THUNDER"
COULD BE.



I'LL BE
WAITING FOR
YOU THEN.
IF WE DON'T ALL
GO TOGETHER
TO VISIT MY
WIFE'S GRAVE
TOMORROW,
I IMAGINE SHE'LL
BE QUITE
UPSET.

HEH

ENSEI CERTAINLY HAS GOOD LUCK WHEN IT COMES TO GETTING HIMSELF OUT OF HIS OWN MESSSES.



I'm coming for you, Shurei!

TO THINK HE HAPPENED TO CHOOSE THE VERY DAY THAT GENERAL RAN AND HIS MAJESTY ARE ON HAND TO HELP.



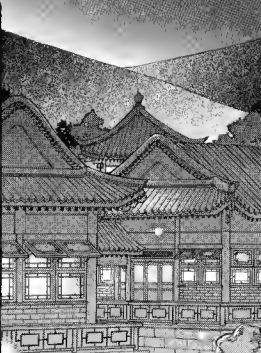
EX-CUSE ME...

HAVE YOU SEEN ENSEI?

IF YOU MEAN THAT MAN WHO WAS WITH YOU, HE SAID HE HAD AN ERRAND AND STEPPED OUT.



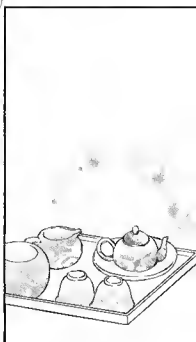
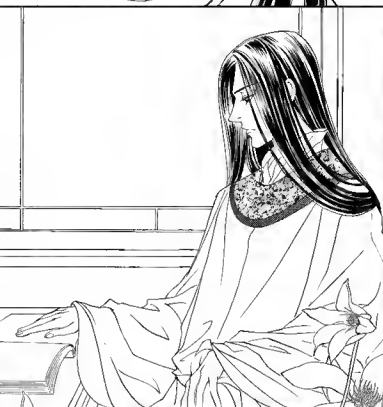
MM?





I DON'T
UNDERSTAND
WHAT'S
GOTTEN
INTO ENSEI
TODAY.

WHAT?



I
THINK I
WOULD.

WOULD
YOU LIKE
SOME
TEA?

I SEEM
TO HAVE
GOTTEN
USED TO
THIS SORT
OF THING
LATELY...







IF I HAD TO
CHOOSE ONE
OR THE OTHER,
I'D SAY HIS
NATURE TENDS
MORE TOWARD
KINDNESS, EVEN
IF HE DOESN'T
SPEAK MUCH.

EVEN
THOUGH HE'S
A STERN
TASKMASTER,
HE NEVER
DEMANDS
ANYTHING
UNREASON-
ABLE.

HE
PRIORITIZES
HIS WORK
ABOVE ALL
ELSE.



IT
WAS ONLY
SUPPOSED
TO BE A
TEMPORARY
JOB ANYWAY.

AND I
MADE SO
MANY
MISTAKES
I CAN'T
EVEN KEEP
COUNT.

THOUGH I'M
SURE HE'LL
BE RELIEVED
TO HAVE A
CLUMSY NOVICE
LIKE ME OUT
FROM
UNDERFOOT.

IT WOULD
TRULY BE
WONDERFUL
IF I COULD
WORK FOR
SUCH A
PERSON IN
THE FUTURE.

SADLY
I'LL HAVE
TO STOP
WORKING
FOR HIM
QUITE
SOON.



NOTHING.
I'M SURE
YOUR
EMPLOYER
ALSO THINKS
IT'S A SHAME
TO SEE YOU GO...
AT LEAST,
I WOULD
IMAGINE SO.

HUH?

YES,
BUT YOU
ALWAYS
CORRECTED
THEM
IMMEDIATELY.





IT
ALMOST
FEELS
LIKE IT'S
MINISTER KO
WHO IS SAY-
ING THAT TO
ME...

IT
MAKES
ME
VERY
HAPPY...



I...
WOULD
BE VERY
GLAD
IF THAT
WERE
TRUE.



GOOD.
THAT
SHOULD
BE MORE
THAN
ENOUGH
TRAPS.



AH.



I KNEW
YOU'D COME
TO HELP
ME OUT,
MY GOOD
FRIEND
SEIRAN!

THOUGH
I DIDN'T
THINK HE'D
BRING
ALONG
SO MANY
HELPERS...



YOU SAY
YOU'RE A
FRIEND
OF MY
BROTHER-
SEIRAN?

JUST
WHO
ARE
YOU?!



THEN WHY
DIDN'T YOU
MENTION
THAT IN THE
MESSAGE
YOU SENT
ME?



YOU
AND YOUR
RIDICULOUS
TRAPS! YOU
WENT ENTIRELY
OVERBOARD,
YOU
REALIZE?

I ALREADY
TOLD THE
MASTER OF
THE HOUSE TO
EXPECT YOU,
SO YOU COULD'VE
JUST COME IN
FROM THE BACK
GATE.



WE...
I-I
AM...



OOH,
A NEW
FACE.
AND WHO
MIGHT
YOU BE?

YOU ARE A
COMPLETE
STRANGER!



YOU'RE
DOING WELL
FOR A CIVIL
SERVANT.

I'M
LAGGING
BEHIND...



KRAASH



WOULD
YOU MIND
GOING
IN AND
EXPLAINING
THE
SITUATION
TO HIM
FOR ME?

SORRY
TO ASK THIS
OF YOU, BUT
THE PRINCESS
IS IN THAT
PAVILION OVER
THERE ALONG
WITH THE
MASTER OF
THE HOUSE.



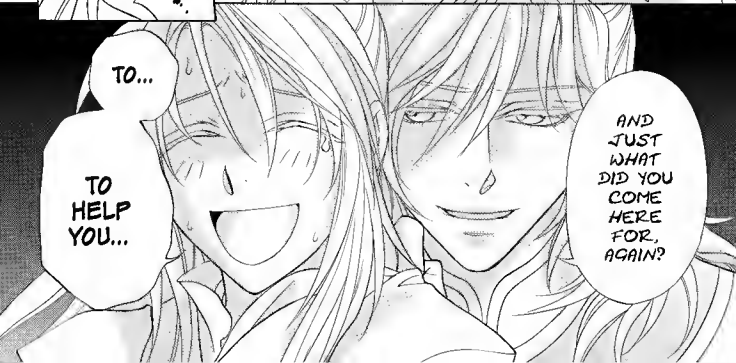
VICE
MINISTER
RI!

I don't
need
your
help.



GRAB!
AH!
THEN, WE—
THAT IS, I
WILL GO WITH
YOU TO SEE
SHURE!—

FINE. I'LL
OBEDIENTLY
GO INDOORS
AND GET
OUT OF
YOUR WAY.



TO...

TO
HELP
YOU...

AND
JUST
WHAT
DID YOU
COME
HERE
FOR,
AGAIN?



URGH...
YEAH.
SORRY
ABOUT
THAT.

BUT
ISN'T THIS
BETTER
THAN
SENDING
HER HOME
ON HER
OWN?

DIDN'T YOU
ALSO SAY
YOU WOULDN'T
GET LADY
SHUREI
MIXED UP IN
ALL THIS?

YES!
SEE?

HE'S
RIGHT,
YOU KNOW.
SHE COULD
HAVE BEEN
KIDNAPPED
AND USED
AS A
HOSTAGE.

YEAH,
THAT'S
WHY I'M
CAUSING
IT AT
THIS
HOUSE.



YOU
SAID YOU
WEREN'T
GOING TO
CAUSE ANY
TROUBLE.



YOU'VE
CERTAINLY
CAUSED
US SOME
TROUBLE.

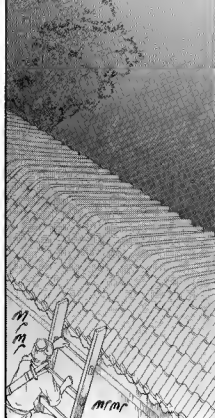
SHU-
REI...

WHO
ARE YOU,
ANYHOW?

WHY WOULD
BANDITS
CHASE YOU
ALL THE
WAY HERE
FROM SA
PROVINCE?

ONCE WE'VE
MADE IT
THROUGH
TONIGHT,
I'LL TELL YOU
EVERYTHING.

WHY
DON'T
WE PUT
THAT
ASIDE
FOR
NOW.



OH HO!
HERE
THEY
COME!

GYA
WHAT
IS
THIS?!

GYA
A
A
A
H!



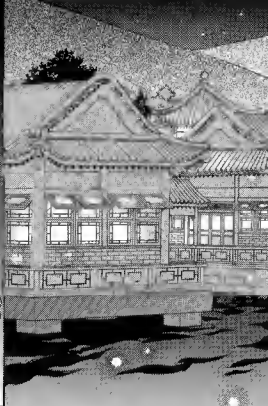
LOOKS LIKE
IT'S TIME,
GENTLEMEN.



EH?
MASTER
KOYU
RI?

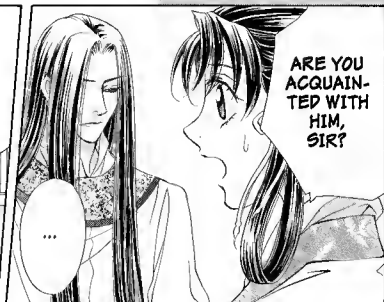
MASTER
KOYU RI
IS HERE
TO SEE
YOU.

MY
LORD...



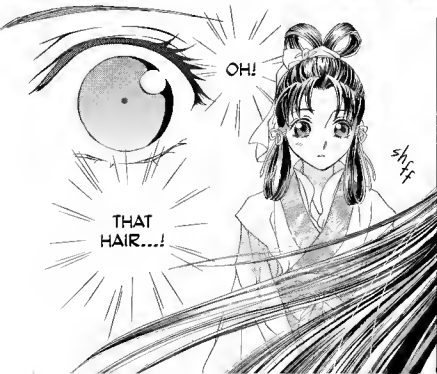
SHOW
HIM TO
ANOTHER
CHAMBER.

YES,
MY
LORD.



ARE YOU
ACQUAIN-
TED WITH
HIM,
SIR?

...



OH!

THAT
HAIR...!

shff



PLEASE
EXCUSE
ME. AND
THANK
YOU FOR
THE TEA.

Y-YES...



ACK!



IS
SOME-
ONE... WHAT?



YOU'LL
BE ABLE
TO SAVE
YOSHUN
WITH
THIS

VENERABLE
DOCTOR,
SIR! I HAVE
BROUGHT
YOU THE
SEKIKOKU
ORCHIDS!



WELL!
THAT'S
QUITE A
NICE HAUL
THERE.



I DIDN'T
KNOW THE
SHUTTERS
WERE
LOCKED...



HO HO HO!
NO NEED TO WORRY.
WITH A FEW DAYS OF
BED REST, HE'LL
BE COMPLETELY
RECOVERED.



HUH?
WHERE
ARE YOU
GOING,
SHORIN?

THEN I'LL
BE OFF!
TAKE CARE
OF YOSHUN
FOR ME!



IT'S
WEIRD-
LOOKING,
BUT IT'S
SHINY AND
GOLDEN!



I SEE.
HERE,
TAKE THIS
AS PAYMENT
FOR HIS
TREATMENT.



YOU HAVE GAINED
THE ETERNAL
GRATITUDE AND
AID OF THE GREAT
SHORIN OF THE FAMED
VULTURES OF SA
PROVINCE! I'LL
GO NOW TO ASSIST
THEM, SO REST
ASSURED AND
AWAIT MY RETURN!

DON'T WORRY!
SINCE YOU
ALL HELPED
SAVE MY
SUBORDINATE,
I AM IN
YOUR DEBT.



ENSEI RO
IS BEING
CHASED
AROUND BY
BANDITS
OUT IN THE
GARDEN!



WHAT?!



THIS IS
THE KEY
TO THE
IMPERIAL
TREASURE
ROOM!



Su ff

THIS...



SHORIN,
WAIT—

SHORIN!



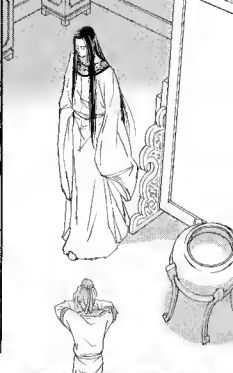
HOW'D
THAT
LITTLE
RASCAL
GET
AHOLD OF
THIS?!

HUH?!



I HAVE
COME TO
OFFER OUR
SINCEREST
APOLOGIES.

IT
APPEARS
MY FRIENDS
ARE CAUSING
A RUCKUS IN
YOUR GARDEN
AT THE
MOMENT.



YOU WOULD
DARE TO
INVADE MY
ESTATE,
RUIN MY
GARDENS
AND THEN
LIE TO ME?

I've already
had to
evacuate all
my servants as
a precaution.

I'M NOT
SURE YOU
WOULD
WANT TO
HEAR THE
REAL
ANSWER.



I'M
SURPRISED
TO FIND YOU
MIXED UP
IN THIS.

WHO
ELSE
BESIDES
YOU HAS
COME?



A
mid-
night
tryst!

THE LAST
IS HIS
MAJESTY.

ANOTHER
IS SHUEI
RAN,
A GENERAL
OF THE
YULIN
GUARD.

ONE OF
THOSE WHO
ENTERED
WITH ME IS
SEIRAN,
A RETAINER
OF MASTER
SHOKA.



FORGIVE
ME.

REPEAT...
THAT
LAST
ONE...

HIS
MAJESTY
THE EMPEROR
IS ONE OF
THOSE IN THE
GARDEN.



YOU
DEFEND
HIM.



THE EMPEROR
IS MIXED UP
IN THAT
UNSIGHTLY
BRAWL
OUT
THERE?

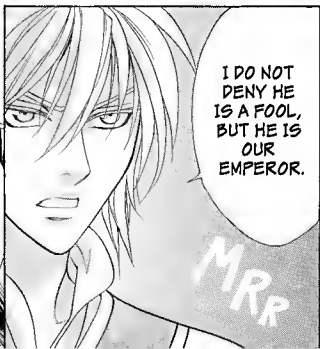
THAT
FOOL!



HE
IS AN
IDIOT!

IT IS
SAID THAT
FOOLS AND
GENIUSES
ARE
SEPARATED
BY BUT A
HAIR'S
BREADTH.

THAT'S
YOUR
EXCUSE
FOR HIM?



I DO NOT
DENY HE
IS A FOOL,
BUT HE IS
OUR
EMPEROR.

MRR



NO—AS A
MATTER
OF FACT, I
BELIEVE HE
WILL BECOME
SUCH A GREAT
RULER THAT
HE WILL EVEN
SURPASS
HIS FATHER
SOMEDAY.
THAT'S MY
JUDGMENT
OF HIM.

HE MAY NEVER
BECOME THE KIND
OF RULER WHO
IS UNIVERSALLY
RECOGNIZED
THE WAY HIS
PREDECESSOR
WAS, BUT I AM
CERTAIN HE WILL
AT LEAST BE
COMPARABLE...

PLEASE
GIVE HIM
THREE
YEARS
BEFORE
YOU PASS
JUDGMENT
ON HIM. HE
DOES HAVE
POTENTIAL.



BUT I
SUPPOSE
IT'S
PREFERABLE
TO BLATANT,
MINDLESS
FLATTERY.



...

THAT'S A
SURPRISINGLY
UNGAINLY AND
EMOTIONAL
ARGUMENT
COMING FROM ONE
RECOGNIZED
AS THE
GREATEST MIND
AT COURT.

NOT
THAT IT
CAN EVEN
BE CALLED
A PROPER
ARGUMENT...

THE FIRST FLOWER
CHOSEN BY THE
YOUNG EMPEROR
TO PRESENT TO A
RETAINER HELD
THE MEANING
"I PUT MY
TRUST IN YOU."

I
SUPPOSE
THAT ALONE
SHOULD
SPEAK WELL
OF HIS
JUDGMENT.

THOUGH I
WON'T RULE
OUT THE
POSSIBILITY
IT WAS
MERELY A
LUCKY WHIM
ON HIS
PART.

THE
EMPEROR
PRESENTED
YOU WITH
AN IRIS,
DID HE
NOT?

YES.

I CANNOT YET
SAY CLEARLY
WHETHER HE
WILL BE A GOOD
OR BAD RULER...

...BUT I
SUPPOSE
THERE MAY
BE HOPE
AFTER ALL.

...I
SHALL
STAY MY
JUDGMENT
AWHILE
AND
OBSERVE
HIM.

FINE.
SINCE IT
IS YOU
WHO HAS
JUDGED
THIS
EMPEROR
SO
HIGHLY...

WHEN HE
PRESENTED
HIS
RETAINERS
WITH
THOSE
IRISES...

...HE
BOUND
HIMSELF
TO THAT
TRUST IN
AN OATH
THAT
HE CAN
NEVER
BREAK.

LORD
SHOKA'S
DAUGHTER
IS IN THE
ROOM NEXT
TO THIS ONE.
YOU MAY
GO TO HER.

MINISTER
KO,
THAT
GIRL IS
ACTUALLY—

SO SHE
DIDN'T
MANAGE
TO FOOL
HIM...

...

THE
ONE TO
TELL ME
SHOULD
NOT BE
YOU.

GO.



THOSE
TWO
HAVE
BEEN A
GREAT
HELP
TO US.



VICE
MINISTER
RI.

YES?



THOSE
WORDS
ALONE
MEAN IT
WAS ALL
WORTH-
WHILE.

I AM
GLAD
TO
HEAR
IT.





OH,
HON-
ESTLY...

YOU
DIDN'T
HAVE TO
BULLY MY
ADORABLE
WARD SO
MUCH.

HOJU...

Minister
of Civil
Affairs,
Reishin
Hong.

Younger
brother
of Shoka
Hong and
current
Head of
the Hong
Clan.

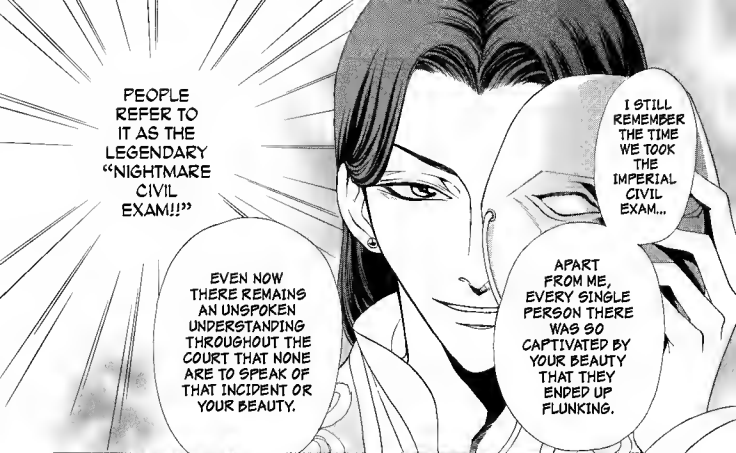


KOYU
SENT ME A
NOTE SAYING
HE WAS
COMING HERE
TONIGHT,
SO I THOUGHT
I'D DROP
BY TOO.

YOU...
I SUPPOSE
YOU SWEET-
TALKED MY
SERVANTS
INTO LETTING
YOU IN THE
HOUSE
AGAIN?

And you were
eaves-
dropping
as well?!

BREATH-
TAKING
AS
ALWAYS.



PEOPLE
REFER TO
IT AS THE
LEGENDARY
"NIGHTMARE
CIVIL
EXAM!!!"

I STILL
REMEMBER
THE TIME
WE TOOK
THE
IMPERIAL
CIVIL
EXAM...

EVEN NOW
THERE REMAINS
AN UNSPOKEN
UNDERSTANDING
THROUGHOUT THE
COURT THAT NONE
ARE TO SPEAK OF
THAT INCIDENT OR
YOUR BEAUTY.

APART
FROM ME,
EVERY SINGLE
PERSON THERE
WAS SO
CAPTIVATED BY
YOUR BEAUTY
THAT THEY
ENDED UP
FLUNKING.



YOU'RE
STILL
CARRYING
A
GRUDGE?

YOU
ESPECIALLY
HAVE NO
RIGHT.

SILENCE.
I'LL NOT
LISTEN
TO YOU
SPEAK OF
MY FACE.



AND SHE
HAD TO GO
MARRY YOU
INSTEAD, OF
ALL PEOPLE!
AFTER THAT
DAY...

I COULD
NEVER
COMPARE
TO YOUR
FACE IF
I STOOD
BESIDE YOU
AS YOUR
WIFE.

OF
COURSE
I AM!

...HOW
COULD I
NOT HIDE
MY FACE
BENEATH
A MASK?!

HOW COULD
YOU EVER
UNDERSTAND
HOW I FEEL,
BEING DUMPED
BECAUSE OF
MY FACE?!



AND
WHAT'S
WRONG
WITH
THAT?

BROTHER-
WOR-
SHIPPING
IDiot...

YOU
MOVED
HERE
JUST TO
BE NEAR
LORD
SHOKA,
DIDN'T
YOU?



I AM
VERY
PASSION-
ATE
ABOUT
MY
WORK.

I DON'T
FIND IT A
WASTE
OF TIME.

WHY DON'T
YOU GO BACK
AND BURY YOUR-
SELF IN HONG
PROVINCE
INSTEAD OF
STAYING HERE IN
SHI PROVINCE,
FRITTERING
AWAY YOUR TIME
AS A CIVIL
SERVANT?

AND
CONSTANTLY
COMING TO
IRRITATE
ME!



IT SEEMS
PEOPLE HAVE
ALSO HEARD
YOU ASKING
HER TO CALL
YOU "UNCLE."
YOU ARE
RIDICULOUS.

SHEER
COINCID-
ENCE.

I FELT
SORRY FOR
THE CHILD
AFTER SEEING
HOW HARD YOU
WERE WORK-
ING HER.



AS THOUGH
YOU COULD
UNDERSTAND!
I'VE WANTED
TO SEE HER
SO BADLY
AND NEVER
COULD...!

HOW I'VE
WANTED TO
SAY, "I'M YOUR
UNCLE," BUT
I JUST CAN'T
MAKE MYSELF
TELL HER...!



THAT
REMINDS ME...
IT SEEMS
YOU'VE BEEN
APPEARING
QUITE
FREQUENTLY
AROUND YOUR
NIECE
LATELY?



I'VE HEARD
FROM VARIOUS
PEOPLE
THAT THEY'VE
WITNESSED THE
DISTINCTLY
DISTURBING SIGHT
OF YOU GRINNING
LIKE A WITLESS
LOON WHILE
HELPING HER
WITH MINISTRY
DUTIES.

More
like
lying
in wait
to
ambush
her...

OF
COURSE
NOT!
THOUGH
YOU WERE
HARDLY
STAYING
IN THE
BACK-
GROUND.

WAAAH

CAN YOU
IMAGINE HOW
IT FEELS TO
STAY IN THE
BACKGROUND
AND ONLY
WATCH OVER
HER FROM
AFAR?!

SHE'S
ALREADY
LEAPT
ON TOP
OF ME
ONCE.

...EXCLUDING
THE FACT
SHE'S
RELATED
TO YOU,
SHUREI
CERTAINLY
IS A GOOD
CATCH.

PERHAPS
I'LL TAKE
HER FOR
MY BRIDE.

THOUGH
I MUST
SAY...

WHAT?!

HOW IS A
MAN WHO HIDES
BEHIND A MASK
FOR OVER TEN
YEARS BECAUSE
HE WAS DUMPED
BY A WOMAN
"RESPECT-
ABLE"?!

ARE YOU
SAYING
I'M NOT
RESPECT-
ABLE?

YOU LIE!
I HAVE NO
INTENTION OF
EVER GIVING
SHUREI TO
SOMEONE
LIKE YOU!!

SHE'S EVEN
SAID TO MY
FACE THAT
SHE'LL MISS ME
TERRIBLY WHEN
SHE STOPS
WORKING
FOR ME.

SHUREI
DESERVES
A RES-
PECTABLE
MAN FOR A
HUSBAND!

WERE
YOU THE
ONE WHO
SENT HER
TO WORK
FOR ME?

NO.



...



HE WOULD
NEVER PLAY
A HAND
WITHOUT
SOME
PURPOSE.

LIKELY HE
IMAGINED
LETTING YOU
SEE HER
CAPABILITY
FIRSTHAND
WOULD
CONVINCE
YOU FASTER.



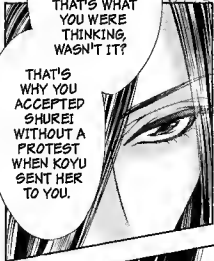
YOU'LL
HAVE
TO ASK
KOYU
ABOUT
THAT
LITTLE
PLOY.

I HAD
NOTHING
TO DO
WITH IT.

KOYU RI,
THE CAPABLE
VICE MINISTER
WHOM I,
REISHIN HONG,
RAISED
PERSONALLY.



"IF THERE WERE MORE TIME, THEN POSSIBLY..." THAT'S WHAT YOU WERE THINKING, WASN'T IT?

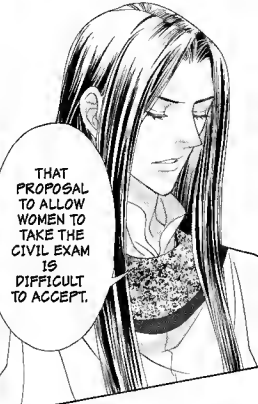


THAT'S WHY YOU ACCEPTED SHUREI WITHOUT A PROTEST WHEN KOYU SENT HER TO YOU.



YOU ARE REFERRING TO THE PART OF THE PROPOSAL THAT STATES IT IS TO COME INTO EFFECT THIS YEAR?

OF COURSE, THERE'S TOO LITTLE TIME UNTIL THE EXAM.



THAT PROPOSAL TO ALLOW WOMEN TO TAKE THE CIVIL EXAM IS DIFFICULT TO ACCEPT.



WE WERE IN DESPERATE NEED OF MORE STAFF.



YOU KNEW SHE WAS A GIRL FROM THE START, DIDN'T YOU?

AND THAT WILL CERTAINLY TAKE A GREAT DEAL OF TIME—AS IT SHOULD.

FOR THIS NEW POLICY TO BE INSTATED AND KEPT IN EFFECT FOR ANY SIGNIFICANT PERIOD OF TIME, THE OLD ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT MUST FIRST BE CHANGED.

HOWEVER, ALLOWING SUCH A THING WOULD OVERTURN THE VERY CORE OF THE PREVAILING MINDSET—THAT GOVERNANCE IS A MATTER ONLY FOR MEN.

ALLOWING WOMEN TO TAKE THE CIVIL EXAM... I'LL ADMIT THAT IT'S AT LEAST WORTHY OF CONSIDERATION.



YES,
BUT YOU'VE
STARTED
THINKING
A LITTLE
DIFFERENTLY
NOW,
HAVEN'T
YOU?

BUT THE
EMPEROR
PROPOSES
TO MAKE
THIS CHANGE,
WHICH SHOULD
TAKE TEN
YEARS OR MORE,
IN THE FEW
MONTHS BEFORE
THIS YEAR'S
CIVIL EXAM.

HOW
COULD IT BE
CONSIDERED
ANYTHING
BUT PRE-
POSTEROUS?

THIS MAN,
RENOWNED AS
THE CLEAR-
SIGHTED,
COOL-HEADED,
DISPASSIONATE
"ICE
MINISTER"...

WHY
IS HE IN
AGREE-
MENT?

WHATEVER
HE HASN'T
TAUGHT HER
BY NOW, MY
DEAR WARD HAS
DRILLED INTO
HER HEAD THESE
PAST FEW MONTHS.
IT'S BECAUSE
I KNEW OF SUCH
A GIRL THAT I
AGREED TO THE
PROPOSAL.

AND MY OLDER
BROTHER—
THE GREATEST
AND WISEST MAN IN
ALL THE EMPIRE—
HAS BEEN TEACHING
AND PREPARING
HER FOR THIS
EXAM HER ENTIRE
LIFE.

WELL...
SHE'S
ALWAYS SAID
SINCE SHE
WAS LITTLE
THAT SHE
WANTED TO
BE A CIVIL
SERVANT.

ANSWER
ME
THIS.

WHY
DIDN'T YOU
OPPOSE THIS
PROPOSAL
WHEN THE
EMPEROR
MADE IT?



DOES
SHE KNOW
ABOUT
THAT FOOL
EMPEROR'S
PROPOSAL?

CER-
TAINLY
NOT.



AND
WILL SHE
PASS AS
ONE OF
THE TOP-
RANKED?

WILL
SHE
PASS?



Aww

WHAT
ADMIRABLE
RESOLVE...!



SHE SIMPLY
CONTINUES
HER STUDIES
IN SECRET,
THINKING HER
DREAMS OF
BECOMING A
CIVIL SERVANT
ARE
IMPOSSIBLE.

SHE'S VERY
LIKE MY BROTHER
IN THAT SHE
ENJOYS LEARNING
FOR ITS OWN SAKE.
SHE HAD NO IDEA
OF EITHER HIS
MAJESTY'S OR
KOYU'S PLANS.



THERE
JUST
MAY
BE A
CHANCE.

PERHAPS
IF SHE WERE
ABLE TO
DELIVER A
RESULT THAT
WOULD SHOCK
AND DEFY
CONVENTIONAL
WISDOM,
THEN MAYBE...



IT IS MY
GREATEST
DREAM TO
BE A CIVIL
SERVANT.

HEH!

IT RESTS
ON HOW THAT
EMPEROR
WILL NEXT
PRESENT HIS
PROPOSAL,
I SUPPOSE.

BEARDED
MAN?
I DON'T
KNOW SUCH
A PERSON.

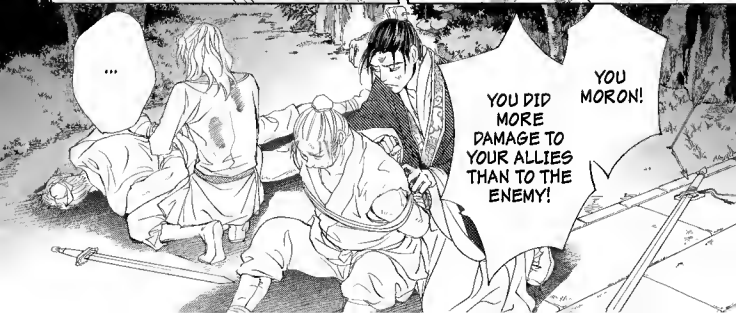
Who?

THAT
BEARDED
MAN WHO
GUARDS
THE GIRL—
WERE YOU
THE ONE WHO
SENT HIM?

I SEE.
THEN
IT WAS
JUST AN
EXTRAOR-
DINARY
COINCIDENCE.

IT SEEMS
THE GIRL
HAS
FORTUNE
ON HER
SIDE AS
WELL.







OH,
I SEE.

YOUR
DAD
WAS A
GOOD
MAN.



YOU
DIDN'T
EVEN
CATCH A
SINGLE
BANDIT!

WELL,
MY DAD
DIDN'T
TEACH ME
HOW TO
BRAWL.



...CAN'T
MOVE...
ANY-
MORE...

ME
TOO.



...SO
HUNGRY...

THAT'S
RIGHT...
WE CAME
HERE
WITHOUT
HAVING
HAD
DINNER...



LET'S HEAD
INSIDE AND
ASK LADY
SHUREI TO
MAKE US
SOMETHING...

I
SUPPOSE
THERE'S
NO
HELPING
IT...



IN A
STRANGER'S
GARDEN
NO
LESS!

HONESTLY!
WHAT
WERE
YOU ALL
DOING
OUT
THERE?!



WHAT'S
MORE—
FEEDING
SUCH A
LARGE
NUMBER OF
PEOPLE!

We should be
ashamed.

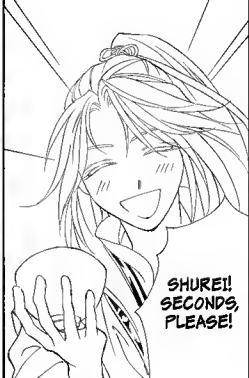
AND THEN
ASKING
TO USE HIS
KITCHEN IN
THE DEAD OF
NIGHT LIKE
THIS...!

WE'RE VERY
FORTUNATE
THE MASTER
OF THE
HOUSE IS
VERY KIND.

WE
MADE SURE
TO SEND A
LETTER FIRST
TO ASK
PERMISSION.
SHOKA EVEN
SENT US A
REPLY.



HOW
COME
YOU'RE
HERE?



SHUREI!
SECONDS,
PLEASE!



HERE
YOU
GO.

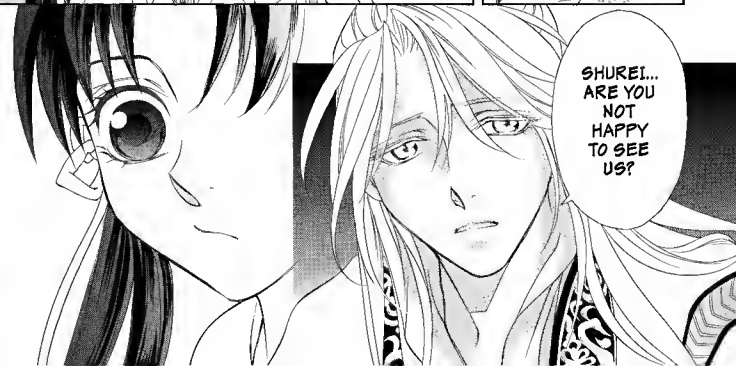
WE'VE
BEEN
HOLDING
OURSELF
BACK FOR
THREE
WHOLE
MONTHS.

ANYWAY,
YOU
SHOULDN'T
BE STEPPING
OUT OF THE
PALACE SO
RECKLESSLY.



Goodness...

OH,
FATHER!
WHY
DIDN'T YOU
MENTION
A WORD
OF THIS
TO ME?



SHUREI...
ARE YOU
NOT
HAPPY
TO SEE
US?



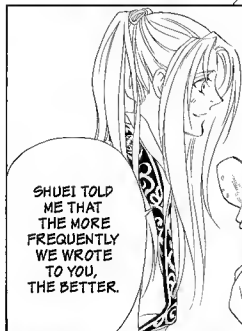
YOU
READ
OUR
LETTERS?

SEEING
YOU IN
PERSON
AGAIN...
YES,
I GUESS
I AM
HAPPY.



ACTUALLY,
I'VE SEEN
HIM SECRETLY
THESE PAST
TWO WEEKS
WHILE
WORKING AT
THE MINISTRY.

WELL,
WITH ALL YOUR
LETTERS AND
STRANGE PRESENTS,
IT DOESN'T FEEL
LIKE I HAVEN'T SEEN
YOU FOR MONTHS...

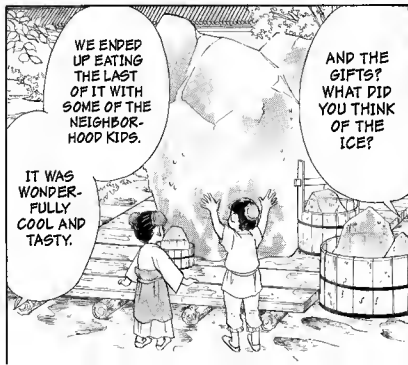
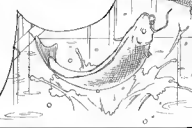


SHUEI TOLD
ME THAT
THE MORE
FREQUENTLY
WE WROTE
TO YOU,
THE BETTER.



AND
WHY ON
EARTH DID
YOU WRITE
"IT'S RAINING
TODAY, SO THE
KOI FISH IN
THE POND
ARE VERY
LIVELY"?

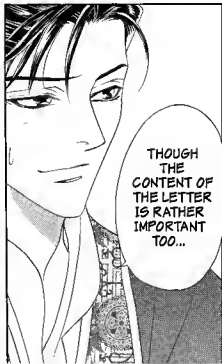
OF
COURSE I DID.
BUT IT'S A
WASTE TO USE
SUCH FINE PAPER
AND SCRAWL
ONLY A SINGLE
LINE ON IT.
SO PLEASE
STOP DOING
THAT.



WE ENDED
UP EATING
THE LAST
OF IT WITH
SOME OF THE
NEIGHBOR-
HOOD KIDS.

IT WAS
WONDER-
FULLY
COOL AND
TASTY.

AND THE
GIFTS?
WHAT DID
YOU THINK
OF THE
ICE?



THOUGH
THE
CONTENT OF
THE LETTER
IS RATHER
IMPORTANT
TOO...





A
CHERRY
TREE.

THE
SAPLING WAS
TOO BIG TO
CARRY WITH
US, BUT WE
WANTED TO
GIVE YOU THIS
TWIG FROM
IT TONIGHT.

YOU
ONCE TOLD
US THAT
THE CHERRY
TREES
IN YOUR
GARDEN NO
LONGER
BLOOM.

...



THE CHERRY
TREES THAT
FATHER,
MOTHER,
SEIRAN AND
I PLANTED
TOGETHER
SO LONG AGO
WILL NEVER
BLOOM AGAIN.

DID WE DO
SOME-
THING
WRONG?
HUH...?
SHU-
REI!

NO...

THE
SAME
GOES
FOR
THE
OTHER
TREES.

JUST
AS HIS
GIFT WILL
BRING
A NEW
START
TO THE
GARDEN.

BUT I BELIEVE
THAT THIS
EMPEROR WILL
BRING ABOUT
THE START OF
A NEW ERA.

THAT GARDEN,
WHERE THE
FLOWERS
NO LONGER
BLOOM,
IS THE
SYMBOL OF
BOTH HAPPY
AND SAD
BYGONE DAYS.

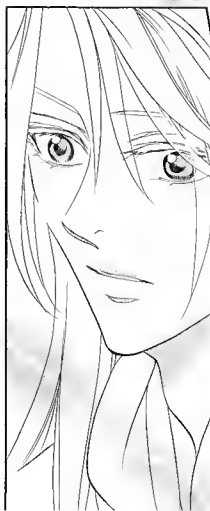
FLOWERS
WILL BLOOM
AGAIN IN THIS
GARDEN.

...I CAN
PLANT
NEW SEEDS
AND CREATE
A NEW
GARDEN...!

IF I CAN LET
GO OF THOSE
SAD MEMORIES,
LET THEM SLIP
AWAY INTO
THE PAST...

I LOVE
IT,
RYUKI.
I LOVE IT
THE MOST
OF ALL
YOUR
GIFTS.

THANK
YOU.

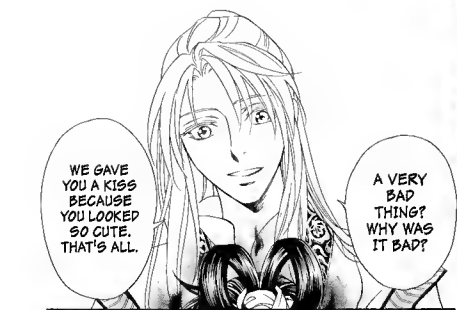




S-SOMETHING
HUGE AND
INCOMPRE-
HENSIBLE
JUST
HAPPENED...!



J-JUST
NOW...



WE GAVE
YOU A KISS
BECAUSE
YOU LOOKED
SO CUTE.
THAT'S ALL.

A VERY
BAD
THING?
WHY WAS
IT BAD?



RYUKI...
DO YOU
UNDERSTAND
THAT YOU
DID A VERY
BAD THING
JUST NOW...?



THEREFORE,
SIMPLY BELIEVE
ME WHEN I SAY
IT WAS WRONG,
AND MEEKLY
ACCEPT THE
CONSEQUENCES!

I REALIZE
THAT EVEN
IF I TRIED
TO EXPLAIN,
IT WOULD BE
BEYOND YOUR
COMPREHEN-
SION.



GRAB

HUH?!

THAT'S
UNFAIR,
SHUREI!



Wah!

thump
thump

AT
LEAST
EXPLAIN
WHAT
WE DID
WRONG!



YOU WILL
NOW BE
SLAPPED!!



AN
EXTREMELY
HIGH-LEVEL
COURTING
STRATEGY.

AHH, I SEE,
SO HE GOT HER
TO LOWER
HER DEFENSES
WITH THE OTHER
GIFTS FIRST
BEFORE TAKING
HER BY
SURPRISE WITH
THE REAL GIFT!

YOU
EXASPER-
ATING
PARADOX
OF A
MAN!!

YOU ARE
THE LAST
PERSON
WHO SHOULD
COMPLAIN
ABOUT
BEING
UNFAIR!!



IS HIS
MIND
ALWAYS
IN THE
GUTTER?!

HIS
HIGHNESS
IS STILL TOO
NAÏVE WHEN
IT COMES TO
GOING IN FOR
THE KILL...

BUT PERHAPS IT
WOULD HAVE BEEN
BEST IF HE'D WAITED
UNTIL THEY WERE ALONE
TO TRY THE KISS?
THE OUTCOME MIGHT
HAVE BEEN QUITE
DIFFERENT...



NOT
PARTICU-
LARLY.

AREN'T
YOU UPSET?
HE LAID A
HAND ON YOUR
PRECIOUS
PRINCESS!



BUT THE
GIFT OF
THE CHERRY
TREE SAPLING
TRULY IS
APPRECIATED.

SINCE HE
DID IT ALL
UNCONSCIOUSLY,
LADY SHUREI
WAS ABLE
TO ACCEPT
HIS GIFTS.

WITH THIS,
LADY SHUREI
WILL NO
LONGER HAVE
TO CRY
WHEN SHE
SEES THE
GARDEN.



IN THE END,
EVERYONE
ENDED UP
STAYING THE
NIGHT...



YOU CAN
SLEEP
ON YOUR
OWN NOW,
RIGHT?

GOOD
NIGHT.
TRY TO GET
A LITTLE
REST
BEFORE
MORNING!

SO
HEART-
BREAK-
ING...

WHAT A
SHAME WE'RE
UNDER THE
SAME ROOF
WITH SHUREI
AGAIN BUT WE
CAN'T SHARE
A ROOM WITH
HER...

ENSEI?

IT'S
ENSEI.
MAY I
COME IN
FOR A
MOMENT?

KNOK
KNOK

WHAT
IS IT
AT THIS
LATE...

THAT
BEARLIKE
BEARDED
MAN...!!

THE
ONE WHO
SPEAKS SO
FAMILIARLY
WITH
SHUREI...

THE
MAN WHO
INTRODUCED
HIMSELF
AS MY
BROTHER'S
FRIEND...



WHO
ARE
YOU?



AW,
COME ON.
ALL I DID
WAS CLEAN
MYSELF UP
A LITTLE.



...HOUR?





DUE TO CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES I WAS UNABLE TO ATTEND YOUR CORONATION, SO I SENT MY SECOND-IN-COMMAND TO PAY MY RESPECTS IN MY STEAD.

I AM THE GOVERNOR OF SA PROVINCE, ENSEI RO.

HE'S THE IMPERIAL GOVERNOR OF SA PROVINCE?!

HE HAS A CROSS-SHAPED SCAR ON HIS LEFT CHEEK...

HE'S THE ONE THE BANDITS WERE PURSUING.

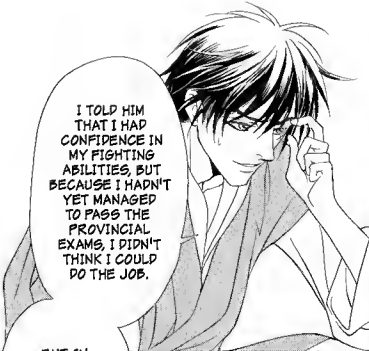


YOU WERE THAT EXCEPTIONAL CASE—THE ONE MADE A PROVINCIAL GOVERNOR WITHOUT HAVING TAKEN THE CIVIL EXAM.

HAVE YOU HEARD OF ME, YOUR MAJESTY?

LORD ADVISOR SA TOLD US THAT THE IMPERIAL GOVERNORS KEPT GETTING KILLED OFF BY THE SA CLAN...

...SO IT WOULD BE BEST TO APPOINT A MAN WHO COULD FOIL ALL THE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS THAT WOULD BE MADE ON HIM.



I TOLD HIM
THAT I HAD
CONFIDENCE IN
MY FIGHTING
ABILITIES, BUT
BECAUSE I HADN'T
YET MANAGED
TO PASS THE
PROVINCIAL
EXAMS, I DIDN'T
THINK I COULD
DO THE JOB.



BUT IN
THE END,
OLD MAN
ENJUN
TALKED
ME INTO
IT.

We
understand
how
that is...



SO
YOU
ARE
THAT
MAN?

YES...



WE'VE
HEARD
ABOUT
YOU FROM
SHOKA.

HE TOLD
US THE NEW
GOVERNOR
HAD
REJECTED
THE SA
CLAN'S
ATTEMPTS
TO BUY
HIM OUT.



HA
HA
HA

SO WITH AN
EXTREMELY
CAPABLE VICE
GOVERNOR BY
MY SIDE AND THE
PROMISE THAT IT
WAS ONLY A
TEMPORARY
APPOINTMENT, I
ENDED UP AGREEING
TO BE THE NEW
GOVERNOR!

UNDER HIS
PROTECTION,
THE TALENTED
VICE GOVERNOR
WHO HAD
ACCOMPANIED
HIM INTO OFFICE
WAS ABLE TO
DRASTICALLY
STRAIGHTEN OUT
THE SA PROVINCIAL
OFFICE.

BUT EVEN
WHEN
DOZENS OF
ASSASSINS
ATTACKED
HIM AT ONCE,
HE DEFEATED
THEM ALL
SINGLE-
HANDEDLY.

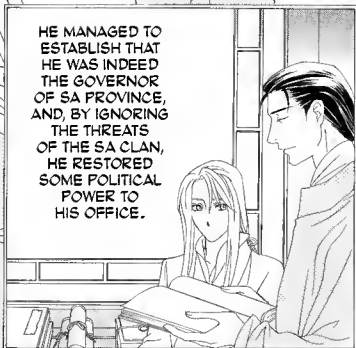
THEY SENT
ASSASSINS
AFTER HIM,
NATURALLY.

RATHER THAN SIT
BACK AND SIMPLY
ALLOW HIS VICE
GOVERNOR TO RUN
EVERYTHING,
HE IS SINCERELY
TRYING TO LEARN
GOVERNANCE
AND MAKE HIS
OWN INFORMED
DECISIONS.

HE ISN'T
JUST SOME
STRONG-
ARMED,
SIMPLE-
MINDED
FIGHTER.

BUT WHY
WOULD THE
GOVERNOR
OF SA
PROVINCE
BE HERE
NOW?

HE MANAGED TO
ESTABLISH THAT
HE WAS INDEED
THE GOVERNOR
OF SA PROVINCE,
AND, BY IGNORING
THE THREATS
OF THE SA CLAN,
HE RESTORED
SOME POLITICAL
POWER TO
HIS OFFICE.





I CAME
HERE IN
ORDER TO
RETURN THIS
TO YOUR
SAFEKEEPING,
YOUR
MAJESTY.



Made of the
amber that is Sa
Province's specialty,
the designs
interwoven in the
amber represent
the Shining
Moonflower,
Sa Province's
official flower.



THAT'S THE
OFFICIAL
SEAL AND
BADGE OF
GOVERNORSHIP
OF SA
PROVINCE!



I DON'T
REALLY
THINK I
HAVE THE
RIGHT TO BE
CARRYING
THIS
ANYMORE.



Such badges
may only
be worn by
high-ranking
officials.
The badges
serve as
proof of
official rank.



THE
PROVINCIAL
GOVERNMENT
ENDED UP
GETTING
DRAGGED
INTO IT
TOO.

WHEN
LORD
ADVISOR
SA
PASSED
AWAY...

...HIS
IDIOT CLAN
BEGAN
FIGHTING
OVER WHO
WOULD TAKE
POWER.

WHAT
DO YOU
MEAN?



AS THE
GOVERNOR,
AREN'T YOU
NEEDED
THERE NOW
MORE THAN
EVER TO
HOLD OFF THE
SA CLAN'S
RIOTS?

THEN
WHY DID
YOU COME
ON THIS
ERRAND?



YOUR
MAJ-
ESTY...

THAT'S
ACTUALLY
WHY I
CAME
TO SEE
YOU.



I THOUGHT IF I
COULD GET THIS
BADGE AND SEAL
OF GOVERNORSHIP
BACK TO YOU SAFELY,
I COULD GIVE YOU
MY RESIGNATION,
HAVING FULFILLED
THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF
MY POST.

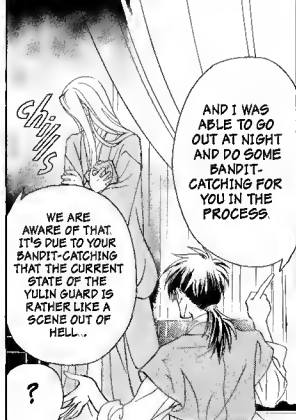
WITH THAT I
WOULD BE ABLE
TO MANEUVER
FREELY AGAIN AND
POSSIBLY HOLD
OFF THE SA CLAN'S
PLANS LONG
ENOUGH FOR YOU
TO GET A NEW
GOVERNOR
DISPATCHED TO
SA PROVINCE.

IS
THIS WHY
ALL THOSE
BANDITS
INFILTRATED
KIYO
AND CAME
CHASING
AFTER YOU?

I NEVER
PASSED THE
PROVINCIAL
EXAM, AND I
WAS NEVER
OFFICIALLY
INVESTED
WITH THE
POWER AS
GOVERNOR.

MY MAIN
BACKER,
LORD
ADVISOR
SA, IS NO
LONGER
WITH US.

IF PEOPLE
BEGIN SAYING,
"I DON'T
RECOGNIZE
YOU AS THE
GOVERNOR,"
WHAT CAN
I POSSIBLY
SAY IN
REPLY?



WE ARE AWARE OF THAT. IT'S DUE TO YOUR BANDIT-CATCHING THAT THE CURRENT STATE OF THE YULIN GUARD IS RATHER LIKE A SCENE OUT OF HELL..

AND I WAS ABLE TO GO OUT AT NIGHT AND DO SOME BANDIT-CATCHING FOR YOU IN THE PROCESS.

?

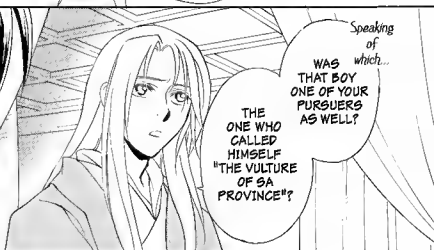


YES. IT SEEMS THE SA CLAN PUT OUT A REWARD FOR MY CAPTURE AT SOME POINT.

IF I HAD SENT ANYONE BESIDES ME ON THIS ERRAND, BOTH THE BADGE AND SEAL WOULD'VE BEEN TAKEN AND DESTROYED SOMEWHERE ALONG THE WAY.



OH! NO, THAT'S JUST A MISTAKE ON THEIR PART...



Speaking of which...

WAS THAT BOY ONE OF YOUR PURSUERS AS WELL?

THE ONE WHO CALLED HIMSELF "THE VULTURE OF SA PROVINCE"?



THAT'S RIGHT. HE STOLE FROM THE RICH, BUT HE DID IT WITHOUT KILLING.

HE WASN'T ANYTHING LIKE THOSE LAWLESS MOUNTAIN BANDITS.

A GENTLEMAN BANDIT? HE FOUGHT THE RICH TO PROTECT THE POOR?

THEIR LATE FATHER WAS ONCE A LEGENDARY GENTLEMAN BANDIT KNOWN AS THE VULTURE OF SA PROVINCE.



SO WITH ONLY HIS NAME AND THE RUMORS OF HIS INCREDIBLE STRENGTH LEFT BEHIND, HE GREW TO BECOME SOMETHING OF A LEGEND.

SOON AFTER, HE GAVE UP BEING A GENTLEMAN BANDIT.

ONE DAY, ON A WHIM, HE APPARENTLY TOOK IN A LONE WOMAN AND HER TWO CHILDREN.

APPARENTLY THE SA CLAN IDIOTS BELIEVED THE STORIES AND SENT HIM A MESSAGE REQUESTING THAT HE ASSASSINATE ME.

YEAH...

THEY ASKED A GENTLEMAN BANDIT TO ASSASSINATE SOMEONE?

AS THEY'RE ONLY CHILDREN, WE SUPPOSE THERE'S NO HELPING IT.

WON'T YOU PLEASE LET THEM GO THIS TIME?

I SWEAR THEY'RE HARMLESS, AND I'LL TAKE FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEM.

I promise I'll teach them well!

THE TWO CHILDREN HE'D LEFT BEHIND APPARENTLY GOT THE WRONG IDEA AND...

BUT AT THAT POINT, HE'D ALREADY DIED.

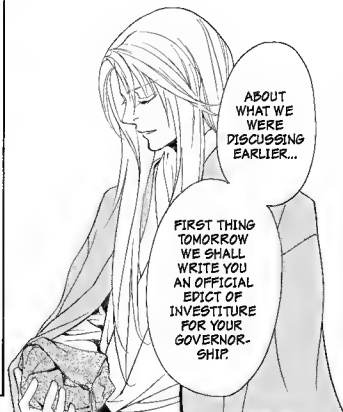
YES SIR, BIG BRO—
UH, THAT IS, CAP'N!!

WE HAVE TO FOLLOW IN DAD'S FOOTSTEPS AND BECOME GREAT MOUNTAIN BANDITS TOO!



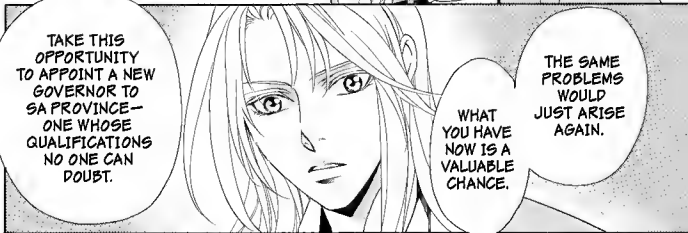
NO,
YOUR
MAJ-
ESTY...

I TOLD
YOU I
HAVEN'T
YET
PASSED
THE
EXAMS.



ABOUT
WHAT WE
WERE
DISCUSSING
EARLIER...

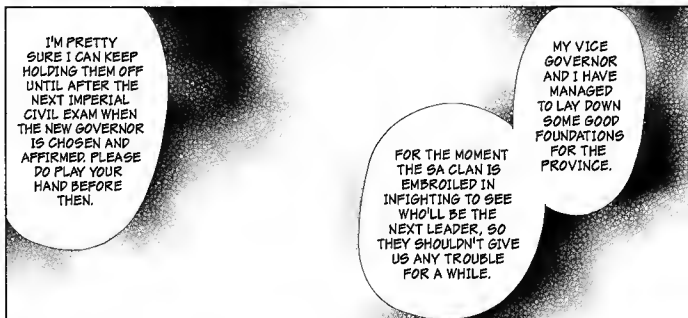
FIRST THING
TOMORROW
WE SHALL
WRITE YOU
AN OFFICIAL
EDICT OF
INVESTITURE
FOR YOUR
GOVERNOR-
SHIP.



TAKE THIS
OPPORTUNITY
TO APPOINT A NEW
GOVERNOR TO
SA PROVINCE—
ONE WHOSE
QUALIFICATIONS
NO ONE CAN
DOUBT.

WHAT
YOU HAVE
NOW IS A
VALUABLE
CHANCE.

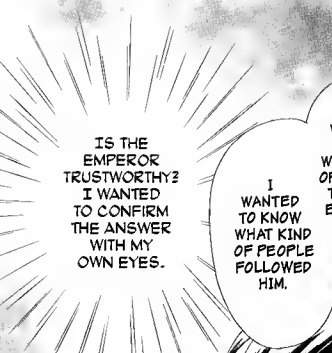
THE SAME
PROBLEMS
WOULD
JUST ARISE
AGAIN.



I'M PRETTY
SURE I CAN KEEP
HOLDING THEM OFF
UNTIL AFTER THE
NEXT IMPERIAL
CIVIL EXAM WHEN
THE NEW GOVERNOR
IS CHOSEN AND
AFFIRMED. PLEASE
DO PLAY YOUR
HAND BEFORE
THEN.

FOR THE MOMENT
THE SA CLAN IS
EMBROILED IN
INFIGHTING TO SEE
WHO'LL BE THE
NEXT LEADER, SO
THEY SHOULDN'T GIVE
US ANY TROUBLE
FOR A WHILE.

MY VICE
GOVERNOR
AND I HAVE
MANAGED
TO LAY DOWN
SOME GOOD
FOUNDATIONS
FOR THE
PROVINCE.



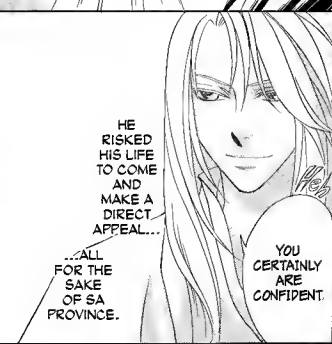
IS THE
EMPEROR
TRUSTWORTHY?
I WANTED
TO CONFIRM
THE ANSWER
WITH MY
OWN EYES.

I
WANTED
TO KNOW
WHAT KIND
OF PEOPLE
FOLLOWED
HIM.

I
WANTED
TO SEE
WHAT KIND
OF PERSON
THE NEW
EMPEROR
WAS.

YES.

IS THAT
WHAT
YOU CAME
HERE TO
SAY
TO US?



HE
RISKED
HIS LIFE
TO COME
AND
MAKE A
DIRECT
APPEAL...

...ALL
FOR THE
SAKE
OF SA
PROVINCE.

YOU
CERTAINLY
ARE
CONFIDENT.



IN THE
WORST CASE,
I WAS
PREPARED
TO SNEAK
INTO YOUR
MAJESTY'S
BEDCHAMBER
TO FIND OUT.



ENSEI
RO...

THEN WE
HAVE A
COMMAND
FOR YOU.



I WILL
RETURN TO
SA PROVINCE.
EVEN WITHOUT
A TITLE,
THERE'S
PLENTY I CAN
DO TO HELP.

WHAT
WILL
YOU DO
AFTER
THIS?



IF YOU'RE
LOOKING FOR
A GOOD VICE
GOVERNOR,
SA PROVINCE
ALREADY HAS
AN EXCELLENT
ONE—MUCH
BETTER THAN
I COULD
EVER BE.

YOU
WILL
RETURN,
WON'T
YOU?

BUT THE
OTHERS
ARE STILL
PERSEVERING
IN THE FIGHT
FOR SA
PROVINCE.

AS A CIVIL
SERVANT...

BECAUSE,
FROM THE
BEGINNING,
IT'S ALWAYS
BEEN MY
DREAM TO
BECOME A
PROVINCIAL
OFFICER
OF SA
PROVINCE.

THAT WAY
WE WILL BE
ABLE TO
APPOINT
YOU VICE
GOVERNOR
OF SA
PROVINCE.

BEFORE
THE NEXT
INVESTITURE
CEREMONY,
I WANT YOU
TO TAKE AND
PASS THE
PROVINCIAL
EXAM.

IF THE EMPEROR
IS WILLING TO
TAKE ON THE
PROBLEM OF SA
PROVINCE, THEN
MY DUTIES AS
GOVERNOR ARE
COMPLETE.

BUT I DO
INTEND TO
TAKE THE
PROVINCIAL
EXAM.

IT'S JUST AS
WELL. I WAS
STARTING
TO FEEL A
LITTLE STIFLED.

I DO WONDER...
AFTER ALL THIS
TIME, WILL I BE
ABLE TO START
STUDYING FOR
THE PROVINCIAL
EXAMS ALL
OVER AGAIN?



PRIN-
CESS...

SO I WAS
THINKING IT
MIGHT NOT BE
BAD, STARTING
ALL OVER
AGAIN FROM
SCRATCH AND
DOING IT THE
RIGHT WAY.

LOOKS
LIKE I WAS
THE ONE
WHO DIDN'T
KEEP SIGHT
OF WHAT
WAS TRULY
IMPORTANT
TO ME.

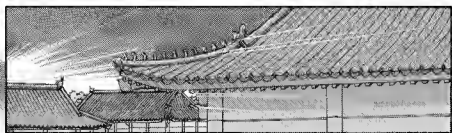


YOU COULD
STILL TAKE
THE EXAM
NOW, YOU
KNOW.



AS WILL
YOUR
SUBORDINATES
BACK IN SA
PROVINCE,
SURELY...

WE
SHALL
WAIT
FOR YOU
THEN.





HE SAID
TWO RAVENS
HAD BURST
INTO THE
OFFICE
YESTERDAY,
SNATCHED UP
THE KEY
AND FLOWN
OFF AGAIN.

WHEN I
BROUGHT IT
BACK TO VICE
MINISTER KEI
THIS MORNING,
HE WAS SO
RELIEVED HE
BURST INTO
TEARS.

...AND IT
TURNED OUT
IT REALLY
WAS THE KEY
TO THE
IMPERIAL
TREASURE
ROOM.



WE WERE
ABLE TO
GET IT BACK
TO THE
MINISTRY
OF THE
TREASURY
SAFELY.

HOW
AMAZINGLY
LUCKY IT
WAS THAT
IT ENDED UP
IN SHORIN'S
HANDS
SOMEHOW.

WHAT A
COINCIDENCE!

Don't
you
think
father?

Yes,
indeed.



AREN'T
YOU REALLY
SOME
IMPOSTER
WHO SLIPPED
IN AND
SWITCHED
PLACES
WITH HIM?

ARE
YOU
REALLY
ENSEI?

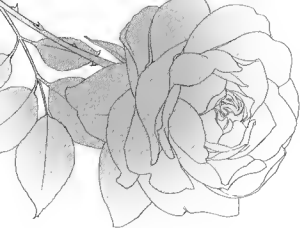
BUT
NON-
ESTLY...

AS
THOUGH
THAT
COULD
HAPPEN!

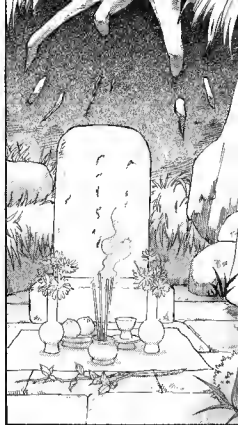


TO THINK
THAT ENSEI
WAS SO
GOOD-
LOOKING
ALL
ALONG...

I ALMOST
FEEL LIKE
I'VE BEEN
TRICKED
SOMEHOW...



NOW THAT I
THINK ABOUT IT,
I'VE NEVER
STOOD BEFORE
THIS GRAVE
WITHOUT CRYING
BEFORE.



THAT'S
RIGHT,
SHUREI.

DON'T
YOU
CRY.

...ALL
THIS TIME,
MOTHER'S
BEEN GETTING
ANGRY
SEEING ME
UPSET.

MAYBE...

HEE



IT'S A
SAPLING
THAT WILL
SURELY
FLOURISH
AND BLOSSOM
WITH MANY
BEAUTIFUL
FLOWERS IN
THE NEW ERA
HE IS BUILD-
ING...

MOTHER,
RYUKI
GAVE ME
A LITTLE
SAPLING
AS A
PRESENT.

I WANT
YOU,
SHOKA
AND SEI-
RAN...

...TO
ALWAYS BE
LAUGHING
HAPPILY
TOGETHER.



?!

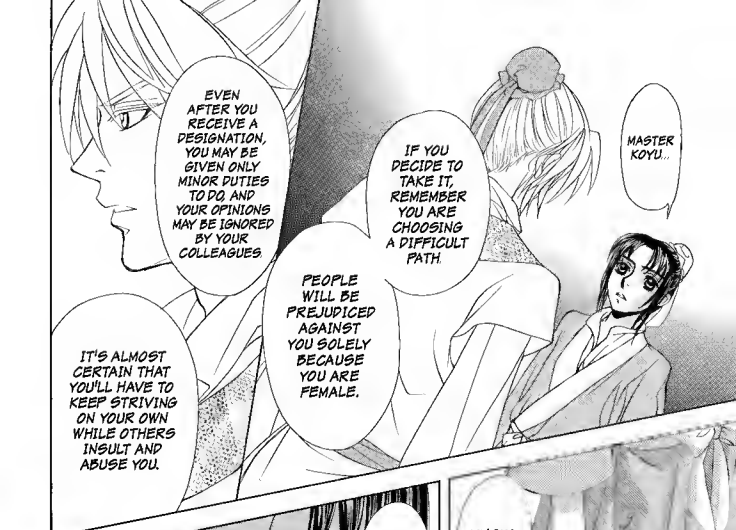
THE
RIGHT TO
TAKE THE
IMPERIAL
CIVIL
EXAM?!

HIS
MAJESTY
AND I ARE
PROPOSING
A BILL TO
GIVE WOMEN
THE RIGHT
TO TAKE THE
IMPERIAL
CIVIL EXAM.

LISTEN
CLOSELY.

IT IS
OUR INTENT
TO GET THE
MEASURE
PASSED BY
THE NEXT
EXAM DATE.

DO YOU
THINK YOU
WOULD...
TAKE THE
EXAM?



EVEN
AFTER YOU
RECEIVE A
DESIGNATION,
YOU MAY BE
GIVEN ONLY
MINOR DUTIES
TO DO, AND
YOUR OPINIONS
MAY BE IGNORED
BY YOUR
COLLEAGUES.

IF YOU
DECIDE TO
TAKE IT,
REMEMBER
YOU ARE
CHOOSING
A DIFFICULT
PATH.

MASTER
KOYU...

IT'S ALMOST
CERTAIN THAT
YOU'LL HAVE TO
KEEP STRIVING
ON YOUR OWN
WHILE OTHERS
INSULT AND
ABUSE YOU.

PEOPLE
WILL BE
PREJUDICED
AGAINST
YOU SOLELY
BECAUSE
YOU ARE
FEMALE.



KNOW-
ING THAT...



I'LL
DO IT.

...WILL
YOU
TAKE
THE
EXAM?



DO YOU
WANT TO
BECOME
A CIVIL
SERVANT?

PLEASE
LET ME.

WHY?

WHY
CAN'T
GIRLS
TAKE THE
IMPERIAL
CIVIL
EXAM?





I WANT
TO
BECOME...

...A
CIVIL
SERVANT.



PLEASE
GUIDE ME
FROM
HERE ON,
MASTER
KOYU.

GOOD.

I'M
CERTAIN
YOU
WILL BE
A GOOD
ONE.

I'M GOING
TO DO MY
BEST,
MOTHER.
JUST WATCH
AND SEE.



A few
days
later...

...when the
monstrous
heat
finally
began to
subside...

WELL,
I GUESS
THIS IS
GOODBYE,
PRINCESS.





IF YOU EVER
END UP FAINTING
FROM HUNGER
IN FRONT OF A
HOUSE AGAIN,
PLEASE FEEL
FREE TO DO IT
IN FRONT OF
OURS.

HEH



BY THE WAY,
YOU CAN HAVE
MY WAGES
FROM THE
MINISTRY TO
COVER THE COST
OF LODGING ME
ALL THIS TIME.

THANKS
A LOT,
PRINCESS.
YOUR
COOKING
WAS THE
BEST!

SORRY
I ENDED
UP
STAYING
SO LONG.

ENSEI...



WHAT
AN
EXPRES-
SION...



Right?



ESPECIALLY
AS YOU'RE A
FRIEND OF
SEIRAN'S, YOU'LL
ALWAYS BE
WELCOME.♡



IT'D
SURE BE
FUN IF YOU
ENDED UP
BEING MY
SUPERIOR
SOMEDAY.



YOU'RE
CHEERFUL,
KIND,
A GREAT
COOK,
A HARD
WORKER...



YOU
REALLY ARE
A GOOD GIRL,
PRINCESS.

AAH!



WHAT
DID
YOU SAY
JUST
NOW?

HUH?
WHAT?



PRINCESS,
SEIRAN,
TAKE CARE
OF YOUR-
SELVES.

WELL,
SEE
YOU.



IT WAS SO
SIMPLE AND
NATURAL,
I ALMOST
FEEL LIKE...
I'M SURE
TO SEE HIM
AGAIN SOON.



HE MADE
OUR
GOODBYES
SO
EASY...

HE
CERTAINLY
IS A
MYSTERIOUS
ONE.



And so, with the fearsome heat wave tapering off, the summer came to an end. In the Imperial Court, a certain measure was presented and passed.

Women were granted the right to take the Imperial Civil Exam...

The majority of the opposition was quickly stilled when both potential candidates for Prime Minister~ Minister of Civil Affairs Hong and Minister of the Treasury Ko~ moved to support it.

...though it was only a temporary measure that would be extended based on the results of the next exam.









Chapter 16



The Story of
SAJUNKOKU

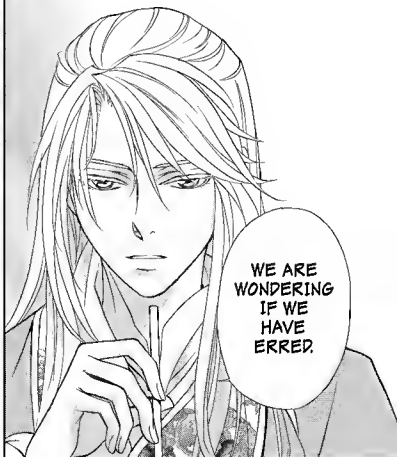


YES,
YOUR
HIGH-
NESS?

SHUEI.



SHUREI
TOLD US
SHE WISHES
TO BECOME
A CIVIL
SERVANT.



WE ARE
WONDERING
IF WE
HAVE
ERRED.



BUT WE
GET THE
FEELING IT
WILL BE THE
OPPOSITE
OF WHAT WE
ARE TRULY
WISHING
FOR.

IT FEELS
AS THOUGH,
DESPITE BEING
CLOSER IN
PROXIMITY,
THERE WILL BE
MORE DISTANCE
BETWEEN
SHUREI AND US.



AS A
CIVIL
SERVANT,
SHE...

BUT
WHAT
WILL
HAPPEN
IF HER
WISH
COMES
TRUE?

IF
GIVEN THE
CHANCE,
SHUREI IS
SURE TO
EXCEL IN
HER POST.



PERHAPS
IT'S BECAUSE
THE SHUREI
THAT YOUR HIGH-
NESS WISHES
FOR IS NOT ONE
WHO IS A GREAT
CIVIL SERVANT.



ENSEI
TOLD US
THAT
SHUREI
WOULD MAKE
A GOOD
CIVIL
SERVANT.

WE...
WERE NOT
ABLE TO
REPLY TO
THAT,
SOMEHOW.



BUT TO
SHUREI,
THAT IS
THE END
SHE'S
BEEN
AIMING
FOR.

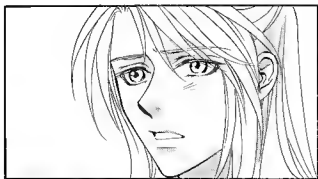
HER WISH
IS TO BE
A CIVIL
SERVANT
AND MAKE
IT HER
LIFE'S
WORK,
ISN'T IT?



I ALREADY
KNEW IT
WOULD BE
LIKE THIS...

...FROM THE
FIRST MOMENT
HE PROPOSED
TO GIVE
WOMEN THE
RIGHT TO TAKE
THE EXAM.

FOR YOUR
MAJESTY,
HAVING SHUREI
BECOME A CIVIL
SERVANT IS
ONLY A MEANS
TO AN END.



LOVE
HAS NO
PLACE
IN HER
WISH.

AS YOUR
HIGHNESS
SAID, SHE
WILL BECOME
A DISTANT
PRESENCE
DESPITE
BEING
NEARBY.

YOUR
HIGHNESS,
I
APOLOGIZE.

?

IT SEEMS I'M
UNCONSCIOUSLY
BULLYING HIM...
PERHAPS BECAUSE
HIS SITUATION
NOW REMINDS ME
OF HOW I'VE
SUFFERED FOR
LOVE IN THE
PAST.

EVEN IF
THAT IS
THE CASE,
I DO
BELIEVE HE
WILL GROW
CLOSER AND
CLOSER TO
HIS GOAL.

COULD IT BE
THAT IT WON'T,
AND HIS HEART
WILL SIMPLY
CONTINUE
BUMBLING
ALONG IN
ITS LOVE?

WHEN FACED
WITH A
DIFFICULTY,
HOW WILL
THIS NAÏVE
AND LOVING
HEART
CHANGE?

PERHAPS I'M
JEALOUS...
JEALOUS OF
THIS EMPEROR
WHOSE WAY
OF LOVING IS
SO DIFFERENT
FROM MINE.

One's method
of courting is
extremely important
in matters of
love, after all.

WELL,
NOT THAT HE
NECESSARILY
NEEDS TO
REACH HIS
GOAL.

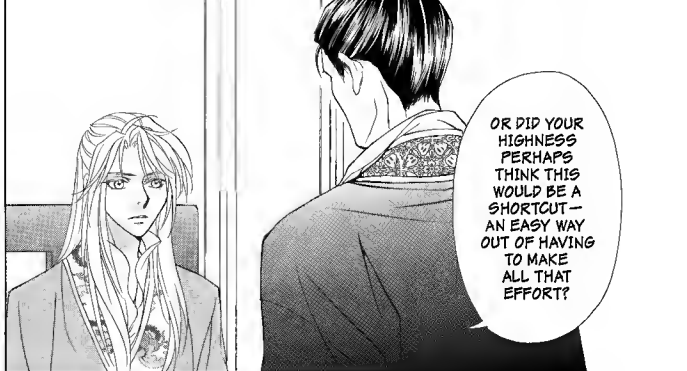
A LOVE SO
GREAT AND
GENTLE THAT
IT IS WILLING
TO WAIT...
IF THAT IS
THE SHAPE
OF HIS LOVE,
I HOPE TO
BE ABLE
TO WITNESS
IT.

NO MATTER
WHAT THE GIVEN
CIRCUMSTANCE,
IT MAKES LITTLE
DIFFERENCE IN
THE TRIALS AND
TRIBULATIONS
ONE MUST OVER-
COME TO WIN A
PERSON'S
HEART.

YOUR
HIGH-
NESS.

IT WILL
NOT CHANGE
THE EFFORT
YOUR HIGHNESS
WILL HAVE TO
MAKE IN ORDER
TO WIN HER
AFFECTION.

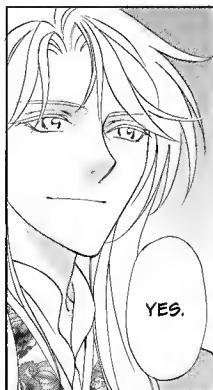
WHAT
DIFFERENCE
DOES IT
MAKE IF
LADY SHUREI
BECOMES
A CIVIL
SERVANT?



YOU ARE
RIGHT.
THIS DOESN'T
CHANGE
ANYTHING
IN THE WORK
WE WILL
HAVE TO DO
TO WIN
SHUREI.



WE WILL
HAVE
TO THINK
CAREFULLY
ABOUT
IT.



I THINK HIS SINCERITY ALONE MAKES HIM INCREDIBLY LOVABLE.

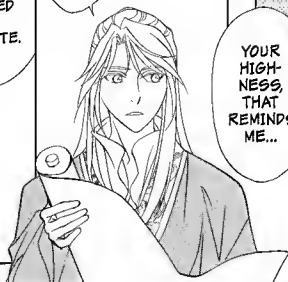




IT
SEEMS THE
DELIVERY
OF THE
CHERRY
SAPLING YOU
ARRANGED
IS
COMPLETE.

IT
SHOULD
ALREADY
BE WITH
LADY
SHUREI
BY NOW.

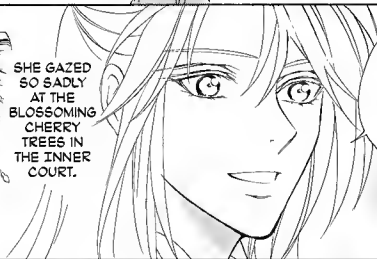
HUH?



YOUR
HIGH-
NESS,
THAT
REMINDS
ME...

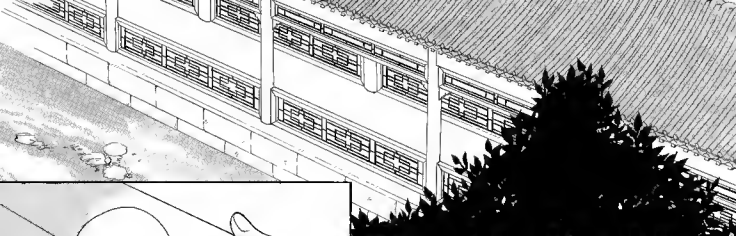


SHE GAZED
SO SADLY
AT THE
BLOSSOMING
CHERRY
TREES IN
THE INNER
COURT.



I
SEE!

IF FLOWERS
BLOOM IN HER
GARDEN ONCE
AGAIN WHEN
SPRING COMES,
WE ARE SURE
SHUREI WILL
BE HAPPY.



"THE
VULTURES
OF SA
PROVINCE"...

HEH



ARE YOU
REMEM-
BERING
SOMETHING
FUNNY,
MASTER
SHOKA?



YES.
I WAS JUST
THINKING
ABOUT
HOKUTO'S
SONS.



SHORIN
AND
YOSHUN...

SO YOU
ARE
THE BOYS
HOKUTO
RAISED.

THE PLACE
WE ALL
PROMISED
TO GO TO
TOGETHER—
THE THREE
OF US—
SOMEDAY...

THE
CAPITAL,
THE PLACE
OUR DAD
WANTED
SO MUCH
TO GO TO
AND SEE
HIS FRIEND
WHO LIVES
THERE...

THE REAL
REASON
THOSE
CHILDREN
CAME TO
KIYO...

WE HAVE
TO GO
AND SEE
IT FOR
OURSELVES.

EVEN
IF DAD'S
GONE NOW,
THE WORLD
HE ONCE
KNEW IS
ALL THERE.

JUST
TURN
TAIL
AND
RUN,
RUN,
RUN!

DON'T TRY
TO LOOK
TOUGH!
DON'T TRY
TO OVERDO
THINGS!

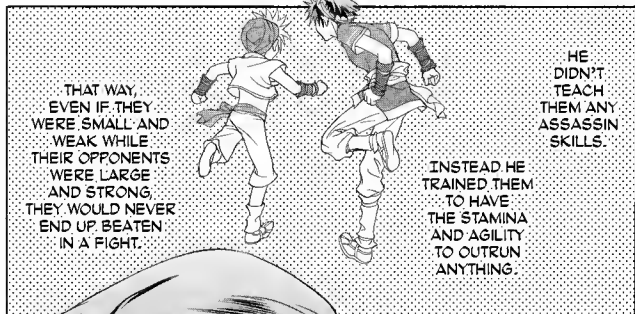
IF
THINGS
LOOK LIKE
THEY'RE
GOING BAD,
RUN AWAY!

BUT TO
THINK THE
FIRST THING
THAT HARDENED,
RUTHLESS
ASSASSIN
TAUGHT HIS
SONS WAS
HOW TO RUN
AWAY...



EVEN IF ONE OF THEM WERE TO COLLAPSE, THE OTHER WOULDN'T THINK TO STOP AND DEFEND HIM. INSTEAD HE WOULD HELP HIM KEEP UP AND CONTINUE RUNNING.

THANKS TO THAT, THOSE BOYS DON'T CONSIDER RUNNING AWAY TO BE EMBARRASSING.



THAT WAY, EVEN IF THEY WERE SMALL AND WEAK WHILE THEIR OPPONENTS WERE LARGE AND STRONG, THEY WOULD NEVER END UP BEATEN IN A FIGHT.

HE DIDN'T TEACH THEM ANY ASSASSIN SKILLS.

INSTEAD HE TRAINED THEM TO HAVE THE STAMINA AND AGILITY TO OUTFRAN ANYTHING.



HOKUTO...

HOKUTO CHOSE TO GIVE THEM THE KIND OF STRENGTH THAT WOULD NEITHER WIN NOR LOSE A FIGHT.

I WISH I COULD HAVE SEEN IT... SEEN YOUR TRUE SMILE, BURIED FOR SO LONG BENEATH THOSE HUNGRY EYES...

IT SEEMS YOU FOUND A WAY TO KEEP YOUR LOVED ONES SAFE EVEN AFTER YOU DIED.

A STRENGTH COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FROM WHAT HE'D CHOSEN IN HIS YOUTH.

...OF THE MANY PLACES
ACROSS THIS WIDE
COUNTRY THAT HE HAD
BEEN IN HIS LIFE. THE
ACCURATE AND INSIGHTFUL
KNOWLEDGE OF THESE
PLACES THAT HE PASSED
ON TO THEM WILL SURELY
BE OF MORE WORTH
THAN SOLID GOLD.

THE MANY
STORIES
THEY MADE
HIM TELL
TIME AND
AGAIN...

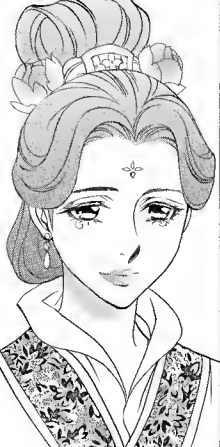
THE ABILITY
TO BLEND IN
AND ADAPT
ANYPLACE
THEY GO—
THAT IS
THE SPECIAL
GIFT HOKUTO
LEFT THEM.

I NOTICED
ONE OTHER
GIFT THOSE
CHILDREN HAD
RECEIVED
FROM HOKUTO—
ONE I DON'T
THINK THEY'VE
NOTICED THEY
HAVE.

ALL THE
THINGS
HOKUTO
LEFT
TO THEM
LIVE ON
WITHIN
THEM.

UNCONSCIOUSLY
RETRACING
THE PATH OF
THE STORIES
HOKUTO TOLD
THEM, THEY
MANAGED TO
MAKE THEIR
WAY TO KIYO
ON THEIR OWN.

IT'S FINE IF
THEY HAVEN'T
NOTICED IT
YET. THEY'VE
TAKEN FULL
RECEIPT OF IT
REGARDLESS,
IT SEEMS.

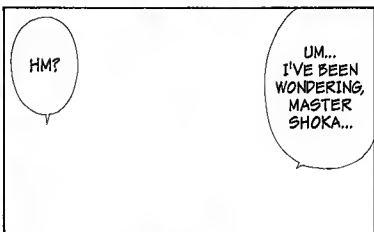


WELL
DONE,
INDEED,
HOKUTO.

I NEVER
IMAGINED
YOU COULD
RAISE
CHILDREN
AS WELL AS
YOU HAVE.



WHAT
IS THAT
OVER
THERE?

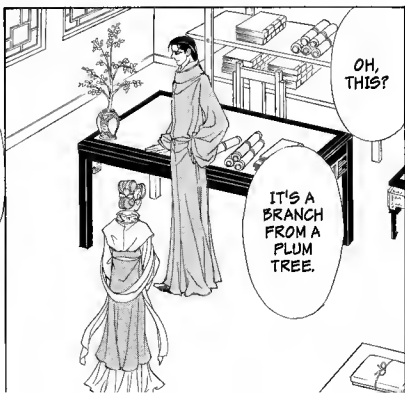


HM?

UM...
I'VE BEEN
WONDERING,
MASTER
SHOKA...



A
PLUM
TREE...?



OH,
THIS?

IT'S A
BRANCH
FROM A
PLUM
TREE.



GOOD
GRIEF...
THAT MAN
REALLY
DOESN'T
LIKE TO BE
OUTDONE,
DOES HE?

HE
APPARENTLY
HEARD ABOUT
HIS MAJESTY
GIVING SHUREI
A CHERRY
TREE.

SO IT
SEEMS THAT
NEXT YEAR
WE'LL LIKELY
HAVE PLUM
BLOSSOMS
BLOOMING IN
OUR GARDEN
AS WELL.

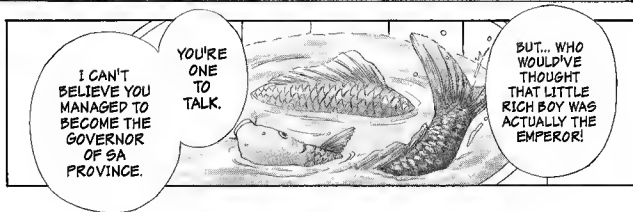
IF THE
FLOWERS
BLOOM
AND BEAR
FRUIT...

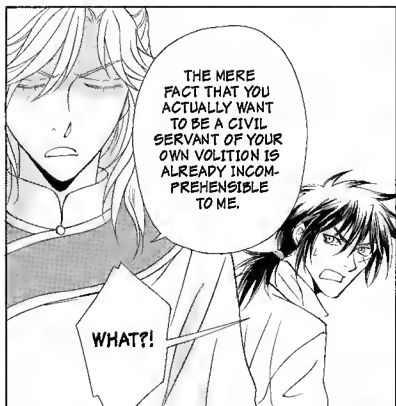
IT'S
FINE.

...I'M
SURE
SHUREI
WON'T BE
ANGRY
ABOUT IT
EITHER.



SPLASH





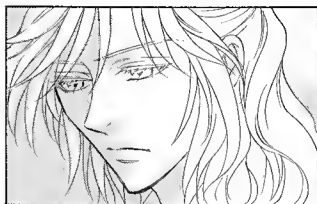
THE MERE
FACT THAT YOU
ACTUALLY WANT
TO BE A CIVIL
SERVANT OF YOUR
OWN VOLITION IS
ALREADY INCOM-
PREHENSIBLE
TO ME.

WHAT?!



YOU REALLY
NEVER KNOW WHAT
LIFE HAS GOT IN
STORE FOR YOU,
HUH? IN ANY CASE,
I'M THINKING OF
GOING BACK AND
BECOMING A
PROVINCIAL
OFFICER THE
RIGHT WAY NOW.

NEITHER
CAN I!



ENSEI'S
ENTIRE
FAMILY
WAS KILLED
WHEN HE
WAS A
SMALL
CHILD.



HE WAS
ALL
ALONE
THEN.
THE ONLY
ONE LEFT
BEHIND.



SURE A LOT
HAPPENED TO
IMPEDE THAT,
BUT I
EVENTUALLY
MADE MY WAY
BACK TO MY
ORIGINAL
PATH.

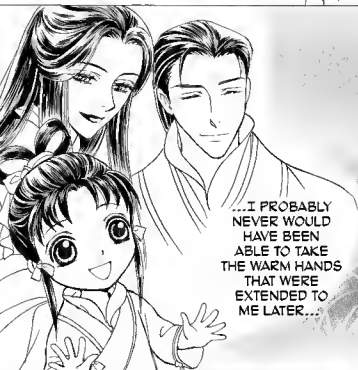
I'LL HAVE YOU
KNOW THAT A
LONG TIME AGO,
WHEN I WAS A
LITTLE RICH BOY
TOO, MY BIGGEST
DREAM WAS TO
BECOME A POWER-
FUL GOVERNMENT
OFFICIAL!



ENSEI HAS A
HEART SO
STRONG THAT
HE CAN FACE
AND OVERCOME
ANYTHING WITH
A SMILE.



EVEN IN
THE FACE
OF SUCH A
DEVASTATING
EVENT,
HE FACED
REALITY
HEAD-ON
AND
ACCEPTED
IT.



...I PROBABLY
NEVER WOULD
HAVE BEEN
ABLE TO TAKE
THE WARM HANDS
THAT WERE
EXTENDED TO
ME LATER...

IF I
HADN'T
MET HIM
THEN...

...BACK
DURING
THOSE
DESOLATE
DAYS WHEN
I WAS
NEITHER
SEIEN NOR
SEIRAN...

THIRTEEN
YEARS
AGO...



THAT
SCAR
ON
YOUR
CHEEK...



WHAT'S
WRONG?

Hm?





THERE
SEEMS TO
BE MORE
PATCHES OF
GREENERY
HERE
EVERY
DAY.

THE
GARDEN
HAS
QUIETLY
BEGUN
TO LIVE
AGAIN.



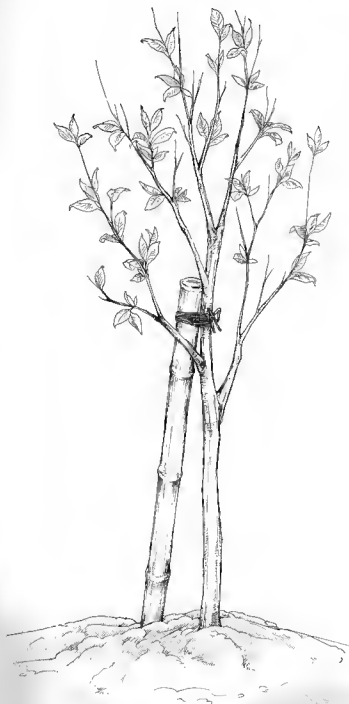
tmp

I'VE
PRETENDED
NOT TO SEE
IT FOR SO
LONG...



...AND
THIS
YOUNG
CHERRY
TREE.

RYUKI
GAVE ME
BOTH THE
PATH TO
A NEW
FUTURE...



...IT
HAS THE
POWER
TO LOOK
TOWARD A
BRIGHTER
FUTURE.

IT'S STILL
YOUNG
AND, CAN'T
STAND
ON ITS
OWN YET,
BUT...

THERE'S
ONLY A
SINGLE
ONE
HERE
NOW.

droop

The laborers
who brought
it over here
were crying
over it too.

THE SEASON
FOR PLANTING
CHERRY TREES
IS WINTER,
ISN'T IT?

UPROOTING IT
AND BRINGING IT
OVER HERE IN THE
MIDST OF SUMMER...
I CAN'T BELIEVE
THE POOR THING
ACTUALLY
SURVIVED!

BUT
REALLY!

DID
YOU
WANT
THIS?

WELL,
THERE IS
A SAYING
ABOUT HOW
ONLY AN IDIOT
CAN BREAK A
CHERRY TREE
BRANCH...

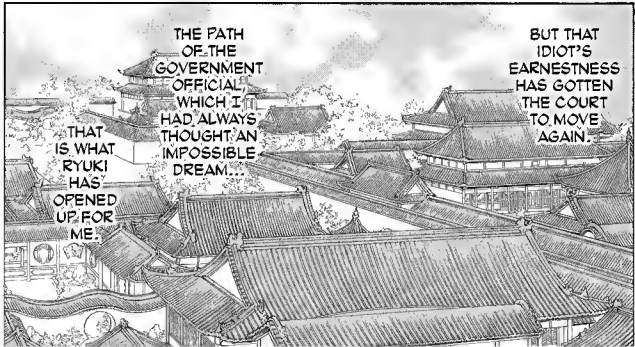


HE
REALLY IS
HOPELESS,
ISN'T HE?

BUT IF HE
WEREN'T
THAT WAY,
HE NEVER
WOULD HAVE
ATTEMPTED
GIVING WOMEN
THE CHANCE
TO TAKE THE
CIVIL EXAM.



HE
REALLY
IS AN
IDIOT...



THAT
IS WHAT
RYUKI
HAS
OPENED
UP FOR
ME.

THE PATH
OF THE
GOVERNMENT
OFFICIAL,
WHICH I
HAD ALWAYS
THOUGHT AN
IMPOSSIBLE
DREAM...

BUT THAT
IDIOT'S
EARNESTNESS
HAS GOTTEN
THE COURT
TO MOVE
AGAIN.

In order to prove merit, they would first have to take and pass a qualification exam.

The candidates must be of noble parentage.

Female candidates would need to submit a letter of recommendation from either a member of the aristocracy or a civil servant with a rank no less than Third (Upper).

The "Right of Women to Take the Civil Exam" bill contained several strict conditions.

...then the bill would be revoked, and women would lose the right to sit for the exam.

And lastly, if even one woman did not pass the next civil exam (the trial period for this bill)...

They had to agree to be treated with no more deference than men.

IN OTHER WORDS, THE FUTURE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN THIS MATTER DEPENDS ON YOU.





I'M
USING
YOU FOR
THE SAKE
OF THE
FUTURE.



MASTER
KOYU...



THE
TOP
20?



YOUR
SCORE
MUST RANK
IN THE
TOP 20.

FIRST
OF ALL, I
NEED YOU TO
PASS THE
EXAM WITH A
HIGHER RANK
THAN THE
MAJORITY OF
THE MALE
TEST-
TAKERS.



DO YOU
REALLY
THINK I'M
CAPABLE
OF DOING
THAT,
MASTER
KOYU?



IF YOU CAN'T
SCORE AT
LEAST THAT HIGH,
COME NEXT YEAR,
THE MEASURE
WILL START BEING
OVERLOOKED
AND BRUSHED
ASIDE.



I HAVE
VERY HIGH
EXPECTA-
TIONS
FOR YOU.

TO SPEAK
FRANKLY,
THERE'S NO
ONE BETTER
SUITED TO
THIS TASK
THAN YOU.



WHY CAN'T
GIRLS
BECOME
CIVIL
SERVANTS?

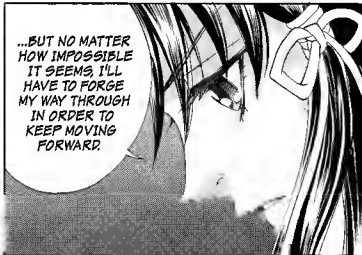
FOR
THE SAKE
OF THE
LITTLE GIRL
WHO I
WAS...



I DON'T
THINK
THAT'S
POSSIBLE
FOR ME,
MASTER
KOYU...

AHH

BUT TO RANK
IN THE TOP 20
MEANS I'LL BE
EXPECTED TO
FOLLOW THE
PATH OF A HIGH
OFFICIAL....!



...BUT NO MATTER
HOW IMPOSSIBLE
IT SEEMS, I'LL
HAVE TO FORGE
MY WAY THROUGH
IN ORDER TO
KEEP MOVING
FORWARD.



THE LONELY
LITTLE
CHERRY
TREE RYUKI
GAVE ME
WON'T
STAY A TINY
SAPLING
FOREVER.

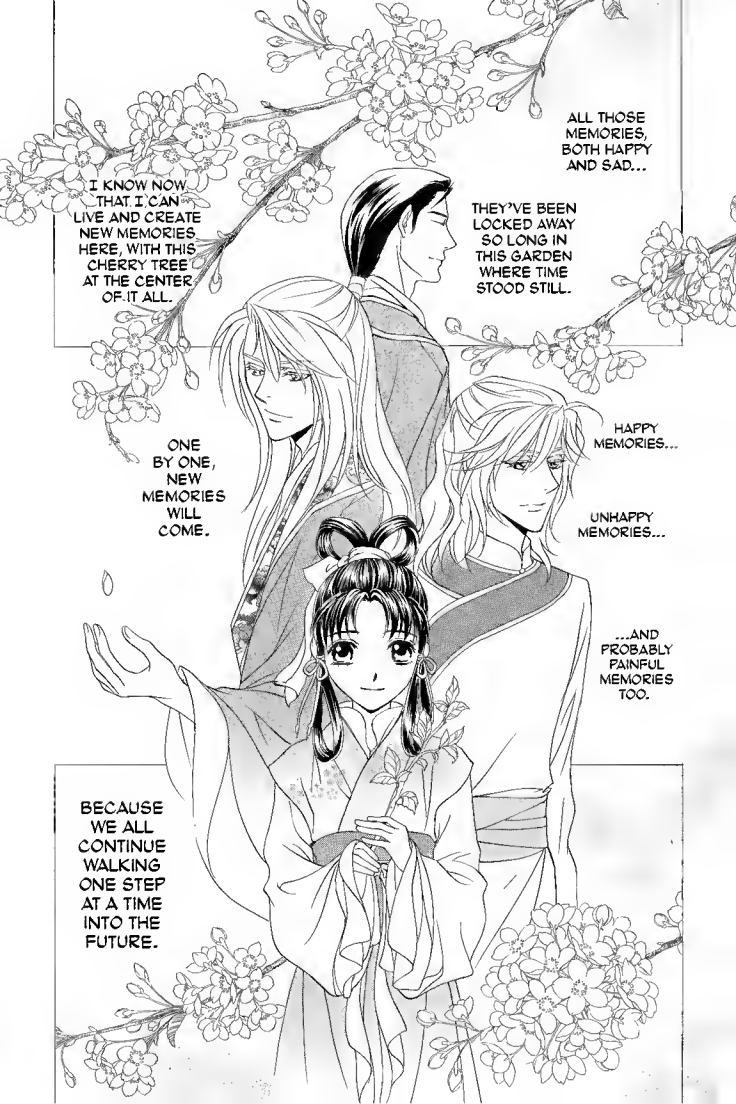
I'LL
HAVE
TO
DO IT
THEN.

IT WILL
GROW
BIGGER
AND
BIGGER...

I WILL
MAKE AN
OATH ON
THIS
CHERRY
TREE...

...AND
SOMEDAY
BLOSSOM
IN FULL,
RADIANT
BLOOM.

NO MATTER
WHAT
DIFFICULTIES
I ENCOUNTER
FROM HERE ON,
I WILL OVER-
COME THEM
AND KEEP
MOVING
FORWARD.



I KNOW NOW
THAT I CAN
LIVE AND CREATE
NEW MEMORIES
HERE, WITH THIS
CHERRY TREE
AT THE CENTER
OF IT ALL.

ALL THOSE
MEMORIES,
BOTH HAPPY
AND SAD...

THEY'VE BEEN
LOCKED AWAY
SO LONG IN
THIS GARDEN
WHERE TIME
STOOD STILL.

ONE
BY ONE,
NEW
MEMORIES
WILL
COME.

HAPPY
MEMORIES...

UNHAPPY
MEMORIES...

...AND
PROBABLY
PAINFUL
MEMORIES
TOO.

BECAUSE
WE ALL
CONTINUE
WALKING
ONE STEP
AT A TIME
INTO THE
FUTURE.

Kairi Yura was born on January 16. She is the illustrator of both the manga and the YA novels for *The Story of Saiunkoku*. She is also the creator of the *Angelique* series. Yura's hobby is going to the theater.

Sai Yukino was born on January 26. She is author of both the manga and the YA novels for *The Story of Saiunkoku*. She received an honorable mention and the Readers' Award for Kadokawa's Beans Novel Taisho Awards. When she's not busy writing, Yukino enjoys massages.

THE STORY OF SAIUNKOKU

Volume 4

Shojo Beat Edition

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Saiunkoku Monogatari Volume 4

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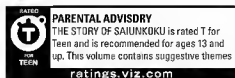
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